

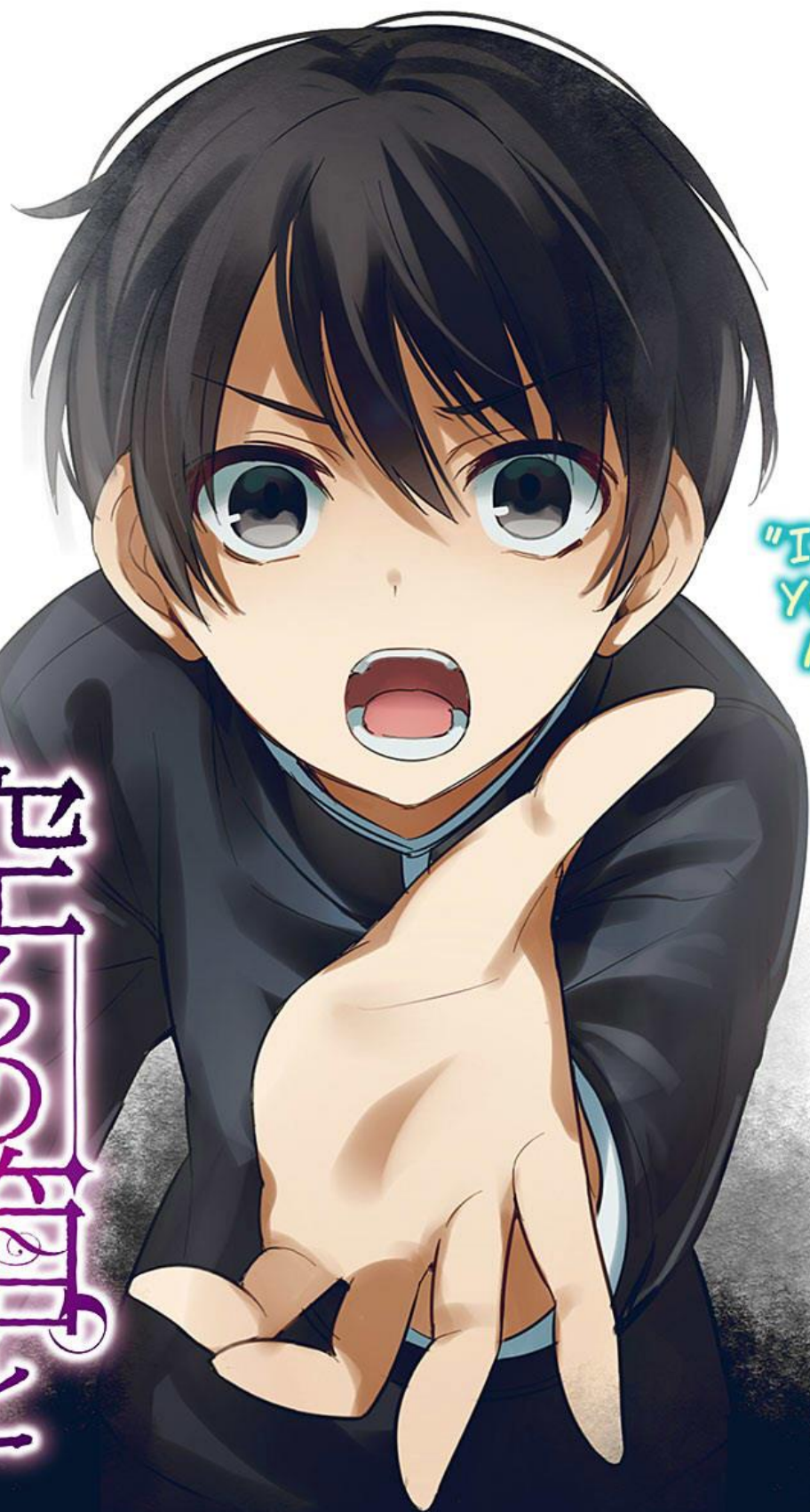


御影瑛路

Eiji Mikage

イラスト・鉄雄

空ろの箱と 零のマリア



"I'LL BRING
YOU BACK,
MARIA—"

空ろの箱と 零のマリア

御影瑛路

イラスト 鉄雄

KAZUKI HOSHINO

USED TO BE A COMPLETELY
ORDINARY STUDENT, BUT THEN
HIS FATE TOOK AN ABRUPT
TURN WHEN HE WAS CHOSEN
BY A WISH-GRANTING BOX.
CHALLENGES O TO A FINAL
BATTLE TO SAVE MARIA AND
TO REGAIN HIS EVERYDAY LIFE.



"IF ANYTHING,
I'D BRAG
ABOUT IT."

"...SO YOU'RE
NOT EMBAR-
RASSED
ABOUT BEING
WITH ME?"

"UH, WHAT?"

KOKONE KIRINO

ONE OF KAZUKI'S CLASSMATES:
BRIGHT, SOCIABLE AND A LITTLE
MEDDLESOME. SHE HAS BEEN
FRIENDS SINCE KINDERGARTEN
WITH DAIYA OOMINE.

DAIYA OOMINE

A BOY WHOSE WITS ARE AS SHARP
AS HIS TONGUE. HE IS WILLING TO
DECEIVE AND KILL IN ORDER TO
ACHIEVE HIS GOALS. HE OPPOSED
KAZUKI WITH HIS BOY - THE
SHADOW OF SIN AND PUNISHMENT.

KASUMI MOGI

A CALM AND FRAGILE CLASSMATE
OF KAZUKI'S. AN UNFORTUNATE
ACCIDENT HAS LEFT HER
WHEELCHAIR-BOUND. SHE IS
KAZUKI'S SECRET CRUSH AND
ALSO HAS FEELINGS FOR HIM.

"THANKS FOR BEING
IN CHARGE OF ME
TODAY, KAZU-KUN!"



"BECOME YOU?
BUT THEN WHAT
HAPPENS TO YOU,
ONEE-CHAN?"

"YOU WILL
BECOME ME—YOU
WILL HAVE TO."

MARIA OTONASHI

THINKS OF HERSELF AS BORING
AND CHARACTERLESS. HER
ONLY SOURCE OF PRIDE IS HER
"PERFECT" SISTER WHOM SHE
ADMIRE'S FANATICALLY.
DEVOTES HER LIFE TO THE
FULFILLMENT OF HER SISTER'S
GOALS.

AYA OTONASHI

A GIRL WHO IS ABLE
TO PREDICT THE
FUTURE—EVEN HER
OWN DEATH.

"COLOR ME IMPRESSED."

"YOU LOST YOUR MIND, YOU FORGOT HOW TO SPEAK, YOU CAN'T KEEP A SINGLE THOUGHT IN YOUR HEAD, YOU HAVE NO WILL."

"AND YET YOU KEEP BANGING ON THE WALL FOR A SINGLE REASON—THE DESIRE TO REACH MARIA OTONASHI!"

"YOU SEEK THAT GIRL SO DESPERATELY THAT YOU ARE TEARING AT YOUR SOUL AND THREW AWAY THE ESSENCE OF YOUR HUMANITY."

"YOU'RE A TRULY FEARSOME OPPONENT, BUT THIS TOO SHALL PASS. EVEN YOUR SOUL HAS A LIMIT."

"ONCE THERE IS NOTHING LEFT AND YOUR ATTACHMENT TO MARIA OTONASHI DISAPPEARS, THIS WORLD WILL VANISH. I SHALL BE HERE TO WITNESS THAT MOMENT."

"I AM THIS VERY BOX. YOU CANNOT FLEE THE BOX."

"BUT WHY DO YOU NOT GIVE UP? WHY DON'T YOU STOP?"

"...I KNOW THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, BUT COULD IT BE THAT YOU WILL NEVER STOP? THAT THERE IS NO END TO THIS PROCESS?"

"WHAT ARE YOU...?"

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"NO, YOU COULD NOT—"





"KAZUKI!
I'M HERE!
KAZUKI!"

MARIA OTONASHI

THE "ZEROth MARIA"
WHOM KAZUKI IS
SEEKING.



プロローグ

Will this, too, become a moment that I will only be able to remember in my dreams?

"Are you ready?"

My opponent, O, stands before me in the apartment that Maria had once occupied. I glare at her, and my mind starts to wander.

I'm confronting a beauty possessing a horrifying charm; she has long hair redolent of Maria's, the slender arms and legs of a top model, and a delicate face with a glued-on smile. Yes... "glued-on" is just the way to put it: her smile is so perfect that it resembles that of a masterfully crafted doll.

It's an uncanny smile that arouses a primal fear.

Until now, O's face kept slipping my memory when I woke up. This will stop now.

O no longer remains the mysterious being she once was, because I learned that she was created via Maria's *box*, the Flawed Bliss. If Maria's box is the cause of my amnesia, then I should be able to withstand it with the aid of my Empty Box.

Yes! Focus on her, Kazuki!

—O (Aya Otonashi)

She is your enemy.

"_____"

It's all right.

My thoughts are back to normal now that I've affirmed that she's my enemy. I smell scented oil everywhere. The fragrance of peppermint serves as a powerful reminder of my goals.

—I will bring Maria back.

—I will make her a part of my everyday life.

—I will meet the Zeroth Maria, the girl who was still ignorant of boxes.

I will go to any length for the sake of my goals. I've already sacrificed one of my friends. If I had to kill every single human being on this planet, I would do so without a second thought. Quite literally. I'm dead serious.

I take a deep breath and glare at O.

"Are you ready?" she asks with an uncanny and all-too-perfect smile. "To say goodbye to this world?"

I scrunch up my face as tightly as possible.

"Why would I want to do that?"

It's an undeniable truth that boxes have wreaked havoc upon my most valuable treasure, my everyday life.

Yuuri Yanagi will continue to suffer from the guilt of committing murder.

Iroha Shindou's personality and the false miracle she believed in were both crushed.

Koudai Kamiuchi was killed.

Ryuu Miyazaki killed his parents and was thrown in jail.

Riko Asami has gone missing.

Kasumi Mogi will never walk on her own two feet again.

Kokone Kirino was physically and mentally damaged until she broke down.

Haruaki Usui lost all of his friends, myself included.

Daiya Oomine is not likely to return.

And even I, Kazuki Hoshino—

I look at my right hand—at my glaring, self-inflicted wound. This wound reminds me that I'm a sinner and a lunatic who is long past the point of no return.

"But—" I mutter to myself as I clench my right fist. A burst of seemingly endless energy wells up from deep within.

Right! I won't give up on my idea of a perfect world, no matter how hopeless my situation looks.

"When we last met, you lost," O taunts me without hesitation. I muster up as much scorn as I can while staring at her, but she doesn't seem to care one bit.

"You seek to make Maria Otonashi voluntarily give up her box, correct?" she continues. "However, you should be well aware that your own deeds have ruled out the possibility of that ever happening."

I bite my lips. She's right.

"In order to defeat Daiya Oomine, you chose to sacrifice Kokone Kirino before her very eyes – perfectly aware that Maria might turn a deaf ear to all your attempts at persuasion after seeing your horrible act. And your concerns were well-founded."

"..."

Maria will never forgive me for what I did, even though that was the only solution I could think of. I dug my own grave.

Breaking the silence, O continues: "But that does not matter, for something far more serious has occurred."

What does she mea—

O answers my question before I can even pose it.

"Maria Otonashi forgot about you."

"Wha—!"

My goal is to get Maria to abandon her box. I must make her abandon the very goal that drives her to such extremes in search of a new box: exclusively wishing to help others. It's beyond the scope of my imagination to figure out how I could ever persuade someone with an iron will like Maria to do that.

And, as if the situation weren't hopeless enough ... Maria lost her memory?

I'm supposed to persuade her like *that*? ...Impossible. I mean, who would listen to the words of a total stranger? How could a stranger influence anyone's heart? My words can no longer reach her.

The situation is bordering on hopeless.

No, there *is* no hope at all.

However, that's not what I'm most concerned about.

"...She forgot about me...? She lost the memories of the time we spent together ... this must be a bad joke..."

—NO!

—I won't accept that!

"Uh ... gh..."

I've become a stranger to Maria. Our bond, which had grown stronger than anyone else's over the lifetime we spent together, has vanished into thin air.

Maria, will you no longer recognize me when you see me?

Maria, will you no longer smile at me when I call your name?

Maria, are you no longer the girl I once knew?

—Then why fight at all? Even if I manage to destroy the Flawed Bliss, there are no common memories left to keep us together.

"It appears that you are in despair."

Of course I am! I can't fulfill my goal even if I destroy her box!

And yet—

"But you will not give up, will you?"

Yeah. I can't fathom why, but she's right.

Despite my overwhelming sorrow, I'm still glaring at O.

I will save Maria, even if she doesn't remember me. I will save Maria, even if she doesn't want me to.

I will not give up. No ... that's not quite right. I *can't* give up. The Empty Box has me under its control. I have to keep pursuing Maria, even if it means that I will die inside. I have to continue my search for her, even if I have to plunge into the depths of the sea where I'd be blind and unable to breathe. Surrender is not an option.

O continues to stare at me and stops smiling. She displays the sternest expression that I've ever seen on her face.

"I will be honest: I am slightly afraid of you."

—An enemy.

O has finally recognized me as her enemy.

"There is no hope for you. That is undeniable. And yet ... I cannot shake off the feeling that you might still be able to reach Maria Otonashi's heart. After all, that is the power you have been given."

She is talking about the power of the "savior," the power to destroy boxes.

Maria created the Flawed Bliss by wishing for everyone to be happy. However, because of the ludicrous precision of every box, her internal doubts about her wish and her secret wish for someone to stop her, came about at the same time.

Maria's contradictory *wishes* created two beings: a wish-granting entity, and a wish-crushing "savior."

Namely, O and me—Kazuki Hoshino.

I'm her knight. I'm the only one who has the power to save her.

"—Yeah."

I look at my injured right hand. The terrifying power to crush wishes dwells within it, the power to erase even O.

The only reason I'm not erasing O right now is that the Flawed Bliss would also be destroyed. If I did that, Maria's heart would definitely shatter.

On the one hand, this makes it seem like Maria is rejecting my help. On the other hand, I definitely wouldn't exist if not for her wish to be saved.

Therefore, there must be a solution, no matter how unlikely. I can and do believe it.

All right, let's summarize.

What can I do to save Maria?

There is just one simple answer: I have to free her of the person in front of me.

I say the name.

"Aya Otonashi."

O—Aya Otonashi—starts to smile again, overflowing with self-confidence.

"Aya Otonashi, hm? That's the appearance I've taken on. And indeed, she is my origin. But I am not actually Aya Otonashi."

"I suppose so. You're just an image Maria has of Aya, not the real person. I'm sure the original Aya was an amazing person as well, but she was still only a human. She couldn't possibly be as unearthly as you are. Something must have driven Maria to deify her sister."

I clench my teeth as I think about how Maria must have grown up.

"Aya Otonashi has grown too large inside Maria. Maria can't flee from her and, at this rate, she will remain trapped. She is neglecting herself—denying herself—in order to become the monster known as Aya Otonashi. So—"

I point my right hand at O, and shout:

"So—release her right now, 'Aya Otonashi!'"

Needless to say, O doesn't bat an eyelash in response to my command.

"You are barking up the wrong tree. I do not know how to release her, and neither do you. Ah, but I do know exactly what you are going to do."

"What...?"

I have no idea what I should do next. Despite that, O claims to know what I am going to do.

"How could I know, you might ask? Well, I can tell because there is only one thing you can do, and since you only have a single choice, you will choose it sooner or later, no matter how futile it is. It is just a meaningless struggle that will bear no fruit, like aimlessly diving into the depths of the sea. However, you have no choice but to head there, even if there is not a single strand of hope to be found."

Suddenly, I recall what O mentioned earlier.

"...That one thing I can do, it's—"

"—It's to leave this world. Exactly."

While I haven't the slightest idea of what O means, I somehow know that she's right.

"You will leave this world and never return. Of course, that means that I win. If that happens, Maria Otonashi will continue to pursue her 'flawed' wish until there is nothing left of her. I just need to wait it out."

"I won't let it come to that."

"Yes, I suppose if you managed to come back to this world, it would mean that you somehow fulfilled your mission of saving Maria Otonashi. That would mark my defeat and I would disappear. You would have released her from her sister—from Aya Otonashi."

It's quite simple.

In other words, I just have to return. Return to my precious "everyday life."

I will meet her. I will finally be able to meet Maria in her purest form, before she entered that world of endless recurrences.

—I will meet the Zeroth Maria.

Ah—but just how difficult will my task be? My dear "everyday life" has been destroyed; how can I bring Maria to a place that no longer exists?

However, as O said, I will continue to struggle, no matter how hopeless my cause is.

"Very well, Kazuki Hoshino. It is time for the final battle," O says as she extends her arms. With her gaze tightly focused on me, she distorts her beautiful yet hideous face.

"Enjoy yourself inside the Flawed Bliss."

With those words, O embraces me.

It's disgusting, and yet I can't fight her off. I try to grab O's shoulders and push her aside, but my hands just slip through her intangible body. It's like I'm getting caught up in cobwebs. Bit by bit, I'm consumed by O's body.

I can't breathe.

I'm drowning inside O.

Slowly but surely, I'm sinking into her. The progress is so gradual that I feel as if I'm completely motionless. However, the light gradually grows weaker; I barely realize that I'm falling.

Sinking, sinking, forever sinking—

—Where am I?

It's almost like I'm in the deepest part of the sea, yet its brilliance makes me feel like I'm bathing in the midday sun.

The incessant noise is hammering away in my head. I hear laughter all around me, but I can't tell where it's coming from. I can't escape the laughter, even if I were to cover my ears. It's so unbearably loud that I want to stop thinking altogether.

I'm not breathing, yet I feel no distress. My body starts to melt into the space around me. The space around me starts to take over my body.

I lose myself.

I disappear.

I don't know what's going to happen, but one thing's for sure.

By the end, I will have completely melted away.



一章

5232回目

23回目

4609回目

10876回目

27753回目

27753回目

2602回目

2601回目

13118回目

8946回目

1050回目

音無

1st time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

Not interested. I can't afford to deal with matters of love right now.

23rd time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

Please spare me. How do you expect me to react?

1,050th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

I'm so happy. What else could I feel after being confessed to by a girl with such a lovely smile?

13,118th time

My brain has stuck to the insides of my skull like chewing gum that's been stomped on repeatedly. A constant feeling of nausea is possessing my body, as if I were bathing in a pool of used oil. I'm rotating back and forth like I'm trapped in a washing machine, yet the scenery around me doesn't change: annoying laughter and darkness.

I can't see anything.

I just keep on repeating.

These loops will continue until I've melted into the darkness. These loops will continue until every last one of my cells has disappeared. These loops will repeat without end.

—I wake up.

While suppressing the urge to throw up, I rub my eyes and confirm where I am.

I see an upside-down blackboard. Apparently, I'm in a classroom at school.

"...Was I dreaming?"

I'm lying on the floor of my classroom. I stand up, scratching my head.

The classroom looks different. The desks have been grouped in blocks of four, each desk decorated with a colorful striped tablecloth. The windows are plastered with homemade flower ornaments. The blackboard shows a lovely drawing of a maid, clearly drawn by the girls of our class, with some words to the right:

"Maid Café"

"...Haha..."

A bewildered laugh escapes my lips; the discrepancy between my nightmares and the silly words I just read is just too great.

"—Right ... today's..."

It's Saturday, October 10th. The day of our school festival.

Once I remember that, the noise around me suddenly becomes comforting.

"Hello, hello? Is it fun staring into the air with something like that in your hand?" a familiar voice suddenly says.

"Hm?" I mutter as I turn toward the voice. "Ah!" I exclaim and look away.

—Whoa! I wasn't prepared to see an attractive pair of legs right in front of me! This girl's even wearing gorgeous white knee socks!

"Oh? Oh-oh? What am I to make of that reaction? Did my beautiful legs arouse you?" she jests.

"O-Of course not!" I counter and lift my eyes. Kokone Kirino stands before me with a grin on her face. She's clad in a light blue maid costume, one somewhat reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland.

"What were you doing while everyone else is working like crazy?"

"Erm..."

What was I doing before I fell asleep again?

I remember lying down because I didn't know what to work on and got bored; I must have fallen asleep after that. It's probably because the day before, we were also preparing for the festival until late into the night.

I'm holding a cylindrical object. Right! Before I accidentally fell asleep, I wanted to eat some Umaibou (corn potage flavor—I love that stuff). Umaibou are like energy drinks to me, and they cost but a meager 10 yen each. They're so cheap, everyone should buy them.

In an attempt to energize myself, I try munching on it.

—Clank.

"...Huh?"

Umaibou aren't supposed to be that hard.

"Oh my god! How can you play my recorder so shamelessly in front of everyone...?!"

"Your what?" I ask in confusion and look at what I'm holding.

For some reason, I'm holding an alto recorder in my right hand instead of an Umaibou.

"Huh? How?"

"OH NO HELP ME! A perv! We have a foul pervert among us!" Kokone shouts.

"...Urm? W-Whoa, no no no! I didn't mean to...!"

"Nooo! He's licking my flute! He's *licking* it! He's gonna take it home and place it on an altar! He's gonna use it to play with soap bubbles! He's gonna play the finest melodies while blowing soap bubbles!"

"I've never even heard of such a perverted guy!"

—However, I really can't remember picking up an alto recorder anywhere. That means...

A deep sigh escapes my lips. I finally regain my composure and ask Kokone:

"Erm, Kokone ... you swapped my Umaibou for your recorder, right?"

Simply put, Kokone played a prank on me.

"Hah? I, have, no, idea, what, you, are, talking, about," she says, playing dumb. "I mean, why would I even do that? Why would I possibly want a boy who's not even my boyfriend to play my flute? Does that sound like the behavior of a normal high school girl to you?"

"No, not at all, but I'm sure you can come up with a reason."

"Oh come on, use your common sense, okay?" she continues. "No naïve, adolescent girl could come up with such a strange idea, right? Surely you understand that?"

"Yes."

"In other words, you stole my flute yourself and played it. That's the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You are a pervert, Kazu-kun. Please admit it. I won't quit until you do."

"Hah..." I sigh.

"Now repeat after me: 'I'm a pervert.'"

She would probably get even more annoying if I refused, so I give in.

"I'm a pervert," I say.

"Okey-dokey, next comes ... Repeat after me: 'I'm a pervert. My hobby is to embarrass girls by staring at the hairs they forgot to shave.'"

"I'm a pervert. My hobby is to embarrass girls by staring at the hairs they forgot to shave. In particular, I can never get enough of armpit hair."

"Eek! Y-You're the real thing! Stay away from me!"

For some reason, she really seems to be appalled, even though she's the one who made me say those words.

"By the way, your maid costume looks great on you."

"Oh, what an abrupt segue. Well, I was getting bored anyway ... Ah, um, my maid costume you say? Yeah, it's really pretty. But let's be honest here: everything looks great on me, no? I'm an unparalleled beauty, no?"

"Yeah. You're an unparalleled beauty. And isn't the weather lovely today?" I say.

"What's up with that indifferent reaction?! You started singing my praises first!"

I think you're cute, but what else am I supposed to say when you're bragging so much...?

"Uh-huh, I bet you're cross because this maid costume isn't designed to emphasize my bust, eh? So you're saying I have to show off my massive E-cups and seduce everyone, eh!?"

Not even close.

"Not only are you a flute perv with an armpit fetish, but you're also a knee-socks addicted boob-afficionado! The word 'closet pervert' is made for you, Kazu-kun! Kneel down before my splendid E—Ouchy!"

Someone rapped Kokone on the head.

"Hah..." sighs Daiya Oomine, the guy who just smacked Kokone.

Daiya just recently dyed his hair back to its natural black color, but even after removing his piercings, the holes in his left ear are still visible.

Because of his handsome face and snappy personality, people call him the sharp-tongued prince.

That being said, he's settled down a bit these days. He even listened to his classmates and dressed up as a butler for the school festival. He would never have gone along with something like that before.

But if a butler as testy as Daiya really existed, his insults against the lady of the house would have him fired within a day. Or ... maybe there's demand for that sort of thing?

Anyway, while Daiya also loves to tease me, he usually stops Kokone when she's going too far.

"Thanks Daiya, you came just at the right time! Say something to her!"

"Hm..."

I bet he's going to say something along the lines of *"You're an insult to my eyes. You can try to dress up as much as you want, but you won't be able to hide your true colors. Fine feathers may make fine birds, but that doesn't apply to pigs like you."*

Yeah, something like that.

In line with my expectations, Daiya, the consummate cynic, spits out:

"Don't play with another boy in front of me. Now I'm jealous."

—What?

Urm, eh?

Could it be that ... Daiya's fallen head over heels for her...?

"...Awawa..." I utter in confusion...

W-What's going on...? Sure, I know that they finally started dating, even though they used to get along like oil and water, but still...!

"Aw..." Kokone says as she blushes, apparently just as surprised as I am. "U-Urm...! Y-You're my one and only, Daiya ... you can be sure of that..." she mutters as her voice fades away. She's behaving more girlishly than ever before.

"But you're getting closer to Kazu than necessary, aren't you?" Daiya says.

"We're friends! It's just because we're friends!"

"Hmph, fine then. It's really annoying that you don't seem to fully understand how attractive you are."

"I-If you say so, Daiya, I will make sure to be more self-aware!"

As she settles down, Kokone starts to smile from ear to ear. She rubs her head against Daiya's chest.

...Are they going to make out in front of me? Get a room already!

"Oh ... did you change your cologne?" Kokone asks.

"You have an excellent nose."

"Well, I'm used to smelling that stuff every day. But wearing cologne is against the rules—you're such a bad boy."

"What about your dyed hair?" Daiya retorts.

"You said you like brown better than black on me. I wouldn't mind switching back to wearing glasses or going natural either, but you're the one who said you prefer my current look."

"Yeah, you look great. You don't need to change it back unless you feel like it; I prefer your current style. But that wasn't the problem I was talking about, was it?"

"...Mm," she nods as she looks up at Daiya. "...Your butler outfit looks so cool ... Daiya, honey, try saying 'welcome home, princess' to me!"

"Silly-butt. There's no way I'm gonna say that. You say 'welcome home, master.'"

"I don't mind at all. Welcome home, master. Ah ... next time I come over to your place, I'll wear my maid outfit while saying that!"

I'm in despair.

W-What the hell is this...?! T-They've turned into a saccharine-sweet couple! Kokone's still recognizable, but what's up with Daiya's attitude?! I never wanted to see him like that! This isn't my Daiya anymore!

"Hey Kazu, what're you gaping at?" Daiya asks.

"I-Isn't it obvious? Don't show off like that in front of me!"

"I've gotta do it because I'm so popular with the girls. I get in some troublesome situations if I don't make it a point to demonstrate that I'm in a relationship from time to time."

"...There are several things I'm itching to comment on, but I'll keep those to myself. Let me just ask ... aren't you embarrassed?" I say.

"There is no reason to be embarrassed about being seen with my lovely girlfriend."

God, he's embarrassing as hell!

"...So you're not embarrassed about being with me?"

"If anything, I'd brag about it."

"Ehehehehe"

"Haha"

"Hehehehe"

"Hahaha"

Cut it out! I don't want to listen anymore!

I end up more embarrassed than either of them. Suddenly, I feel someone's hand on my shoulder, so I turn around.

"They're horrible, aren't they? They're clearly showing off to make us single folks jealous!"

It's Haruaki Usui, a friend of ours.

I start to nod in agreement, but yelp in surprise once I take in Haruaki's outfit. He's also cosplaying, but for some reason, he's wearing another

school's girl's uniform. His broad shoulders are about to burst through the uniform, and because his top only goes down to his navel, the green shirt he's wearing underneath is totally visible. His manly legs, packed with muscles built up from his baseball activities, peep out of a skirt. At least shave those legs, for crying out loud!

How can he wear that getup so shamelessly, anyway? Does he think he's lolling about in the privacy of his own home or something?

"Sigh! I want a cute girlfriend too! You're my only ally, Hoshii!"

"...Tch!" I spit out as I shove his hand off my shoulder.

"Huh? W-What's wrong, Hoshii? That was cold."

"...I know everything, Haruaki," I say in an unusually deep tone.

"...What do you mean?"

"I hear you're doing really well with a girl from another school. You even went on a date?"

"Ugh."

"Ah...! That uniform! It's from that girl, isn't it!"

"..." Haruaki remains silent, a forced smile glued to his face. My guess seems to have been spot-on.

"You've got quite some nerve, pretending that I was your 'only ally' when you're busy making out with your gal. That borders on violence against all us lonely guys!" I chide Haruaki while smiling miserably.

"...No ... I mean ... look, we've gone out on a date, but we're not exactly dating. Anything could still happen at this point. That's why, you see, I'd like to play the unpopular character for a little longer..."

"Feh!" I say as I pretend to spit on the floor. "You're like some rich guy who gets off on slumming it!"

I continue to laugh miserably.

"A-Aren't you exaggerating? That analogy doesn't really ring true for me, either ... and hey, you're no better, Hoshii!"

"Hm?"

"You and Kasumi clear!—MHM!"

The moment he mentions that name, Kokone covers his mouth. I can't help but blush and shut up.

After all, Kasumi Mogi is the girl I'm in love with.

—T-That's strange. I never confided in anyone, so how did Haruaki come up with her name like that?

Kokone whispers into Haruaki's ear, "...Shh, Haru-schmucki! They're still in the brittle early stages of their relationship ... best to let them be...!"

"...Ah, you're right ... but come on, it's clearly mutual..."

"...Hush now! If we barge in, we might accidentally mess up their relationship ... those two aren't even aware that they're acting lovey-dovey all the time...!"

"...Seriously? Are they still stuck in elementary school, or what...?!" Haruaki replies.

Guys, I'm right here!

B-But, it's mutual? W-What could he mean by that? That's not possible. It's true that Mogi-san often smiles at me ... but that's because she's a cheerful girl. And she's only asking me for help all the time because I'm a helpful guy. Yeah ... exactly.

But.

But, given what they're saying, perhaps she really—

"Kazu-kun?"

"Eek!" I exclaim after hearing an unexpected voice.

I spin around.

"Hm?" the slender girl in a wheel-chair mutters. It's Kasumi Mogi, her eyes open wide in surprise at my overreaction. "What was that 'eek' for? Does this nurse uniform not suit me?" she says, pursing her lips and hanging her head low in shame.

I, I didn't know that Mogi-san was cosplaying as well ... She's wearing a pink nurse's uniform.

My heart is pounding like mad, to the point where I'm worried that other people might actually hear it beating. In my panic, I can't even make eye contact.

There's no way that uniform wouldn't suit her! I'm infamous for my tear fetish, but I also have a fetish for maid's and nurse's uniforms! (The cat's out of the bag now.) Besides, Mogi-san would look cute wearing a garbage bag!

I have to tell her!

"It looks great on you! You look lovely!" I say while she looks up at me.

"L-Lovel—"

"Really! You're lovely! The loveliest girl around!"

"~~~~~!!" she looks at the floor, her face red as a beet.

Huh? What's wrong with her? All I did was tell her what I was thinking...

"Oh boy, there he goes again, really working his skills as a player," Haruaki sighs.

"Lately, I've come to think that he's doing it on purpose," notes Kokone.

"For real? He's one wicked bastard if that's true."

"Seemingly naïve boys like him get laid more often than you'd expect. They're experts at exposing the secret desires of housewives—I learned that from my manga."

Haruaki and Kokone sure don't mince their words.

"Um-um-um-um..." interrupts Mogi-san.

At first she seems a bit abashed by her strange utterance, but then she gets a grip and glares at me.

"Err, yes?"

"Thanks for being in charge of me today, Kazu-kun!"

She bows her head.

—In charge of her...?

I really like the sound of that, but I have no idea what it means. However, I notice that Haruaki, Kokone, and even Daiya are all grinning at me. Alright ... I think I know what they're getting at.

My task is to tag along with Mogi-san all day and show her around.

After getting in an accident, Mogi-san lost her ability to walk. She's still doing intensive physical rehab and hasn't returned to school yet.

However, her classmates wanted her to somehow participate in the school festival. We wanted to show her that her friends at school are still rooting for her.

We thought a lot about how we could make her day enjoyable and ensure that everything went smoothly. We agreed that someone had to look out for her during the entire day, and for some reason I was unanimously chosen for that role.

Needless to say, I accepted without a second thought. I'm delighted to spend time with her, and it would be wonderful if her memories of the festival could help support her recovery.

I begin to smile as I gaze at Mogi-san. She's still looking at the floor.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mogi-san," I say and bow my head.

"Ah! But...! I hope I won't be too much of a hassle, so really, I should be thanking you!" she stutters and bows again.

"Don't hesitate to ask if you need anything, okay? I'll do my best to keep you entertained!"

Bow.

"Aah...! Don't bow! I'm really happy that we can enjoy the festival together! Thank you so much!"

Bow.

"Hehe"

Bow.

"Hehehe"

Bow.

Bow. Bow. Bow.

For no good reason, we keep bowing to each other while smiling in embarrassment.

"Take this!"

"Ouch!"

Before long, Haruaki smacks me.

"That hurt, Haruaki..."

"It was supposed to! Remember how you gave me a hard time a few moments ago, just for taking a girl on a date?!"

...Well, I have to admit that I really lucked out.

"Hey, Hoshino. You can go and leave the rest up to us!" yells our class president, Ryuu Miyazaki, in a slightly rough tone. He's not mad at us; that's just how he normally sounds.

"Okay, we're off then," I reply and grab the handles of Mogi-san's wheelchair. "Let's go."

"Yeah!"

I give her wheelchair a gentle push.

What a moment—it once again marks the start of this great day.

".....Hm?"

—Again?

Mogi-san turns her smile on me, and whatever fleeting concerns I had get blown away with the rest of my worries.

Every proper school festival ends with a campfire ... no, that's a lie. I have no clue how widespread this custom is in reality.

Lit by the flickering flames, students dance to the tune of the Oklahoma Mixer.^[1] Two first-year students whose love confession we witnessed earlier are happily holding hands. Looks like the confession went well.

Kokone and Daiya have changed out of their costumes, and are also dancing. They used to not get along because of some ancient history, but they got past that and started dating. They haven't entirely escaped the shackles of their past, but at least for now, they're dancing free of care.

Mogi-san has also changed back into her school uniform. She's sitting in her wheelchair and staring into the flames. She looks very serious, as if she's branding this moment into her memory.

I'm just a high school kid, but I already know: such blissful moments are rare. I'll treasure the glamor of adolescence for the rest of my life.

It's the same for Kokone, Daiya, and so many others. People have their own, personal stories of their adolescence. Maybe they're not always happy stories, but today will still stand out for the rest of our lives.

No day comes twice.

While watching the dancing couples, Mogi-san mutters, "how nice."

I'm at a loss for words; Mogi-san will never be able to dance like that again.

She notices the expression on my face and frantically shakes her head.

"Ah, don't get me wrong! I'm not whining! I was just jealous of how they can spend a special day like this in love with each other!"

Her satisfied smile clearly proves that she's speaking from the heart.

"Kazu-kun..."

After all the time we spent together today, I finally understand how she feels about me.

"After that accident, I thought that I wouldn't be able to achieve happiness in a conventional way any more. Even though I might act happy, even though I might have happy moments from time to time, I was convinced that my disability would always hold me back, that I would never be able to smile without care."

Despite her self-deprecating words, her face is calm.

"But you know what?" she continues, "I didn't feel bad at all about my disability today. Really. That's a huge discovery for me! For instance, I can't dance with you, but I don't mind at all. Not because I'm persuading myself to think that way, but because I already feel really happy. Isn't that wonderful?"

I smile at her and nod deeply.

"Because I was able to enjoy this day, I finally stopped hating myself." Mogi-san takes my hand. "Thanks for making me feel this way."

The fire isn't the only reason her face is slightly red. A look at her face is enough to tell me what she's going to say next.

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

Her smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. That's genuinely how I feel. I'm the only person who gets to see her smile like this. I'm definitely the luckiest guy in the world. I would do anything to protect that smile.

My feelings of fulfillment are about to boil over. Every single cell in my body is vibrating with joy.

This has to be the best day in my life.

And this day—

This day, that I'd love to experience forever—

"Aah—..."

—Is a goddamn farce.

A cold breeze that has been hiding behind the warm air brushes past my cheeks. The sharp coldness of the breeze clears my dulled senses at once.

What is this disgusting place?

The gentle, crimson scene before me turns into a poorly executed oil painting depicting a silly pipe dream.

"Heh, heh..." I chuckle, amused by my stupidity for not noticing that anything was awry until now.

"Kazu-kun...?" Mogi-san asks, cocking her head in response to my abrupt shift in mood.

I disregard her, however, and look at my right hand instead.

As I thought, there is no scar.

—My resolve to save Maria has disappeared.

I do not have the power to crush *boxes* right now.

I look at Mogi-san, whose eyes have widened.

Her confession delighted me. That's true. The repeated days in this box have made me fall in love with her for real. I'm head over heels in love with her.

But this story ends here. The story ends after she confesses and we become a couple. There is no sequel.

Come to think of it, this isn't the first time this has happened. The same thing occurred in the Rejecting Classroom, although our roles were reversed. Back then, Mogi-san was delighted when I finally accepted her confession, only to despair upon realizing that there was no tomorrow. It's the same kind of futility.

Right. No matter how comfy, this world is made of lies. No matter how happy everyone seems to be, it's all fake. No?

I mean—*she* is not here.

Maria is not here.

This world assumes that she didn't exist, and seems like a happily-ever-after. Maybe we would have ended up like this if she had never brought the boxes into our lives. Perhaps, the root of all evil is O and the Flawed Bliss.

Maria hurt us by dragging those anomalies, those boxes, into our lives.

However—

"I don't care."

I live only for Maria's sake.

"...Kazu-kun? What's wrong?"

The situation resembles that of the Rejecting Classroom, but I'm sure that Mogi-san is innocent this time. Still, there's more to this than mere coincidence. Maria's psyche was most likely influenced by the time she spent inside the repeating world, which is why the Flawed Bliss has assumed a shape reminiscent of the Rejecting Classroom.

Its power is to make happiness last forever, but at root, it's all fake and only lasts for a single day.

It seems O decided to pin me down in this world in order to corner me.

Once I accept this happiness—once I accept the absence of Maria—I will lose to O and be trapped in this world forever.

Therefore, there is only one response I can give to Mogi-san. After all, there is no tomorrow to our relationship.

"...Please wait until tomorrow." I force myself to say and run away from her.

"K-Kazu-kun...?!"

Ignoring her cries, I rush into the school building and head upstairs, skipping steps as I go. I finally get to the rooftop, open the door, and find myself confronted by the sight of the sunset.

"Hah ... hah ... hah..."

In order to struggle against this recurring world, I need to somehow retain my memories. In the Rejecting Classroom, I was able to do so by experiencing something traumatic, like witnessing Maria or Mogi-san getting hit by a truck.

While I have no concrete proof, I'm fairly sure that I can achieve the same effect by doing something similar. By the time I decided to run to the roof, I had already come up with a plan.

I'll jump off the school!

I run toward the fence at full speed to avoid thinking about the fall to come.

I throw myself at the fence and start to climb, finally standing at the very top.

"——Ah..."

I see the ground below.

—I'm going to be hammered against it.

Suddenly, I'm overwhelmed by fear. My legs freeze. My brain immediately cools down and starts to churn out excuses. *Suicide is absolutely stupid! Go right back to Mogi-san and accept her confession. There's no reason to be*

loyal to just Maria. Why not accept a world where everyone is happy except for Maria? Think it over don't jump don't die don't think forget her forget her forget her—

"S ... SHUT THE FUCK UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!"

I take a flying leap off the fence and dive into the crimson sky.

Imagine. Imagine breaking through this world.

For a split second, a crack runs through this supposedly perfect world. The darkness that I recognize beyond the crack proves that I'm right—this world is fake.

However, that vision only lasts for a split second.

The darkness gets obscured again, and I fall headalong toward the ground.

Without mercy, without pity, my head smashes against the hard ground.

Splash.

As I hear my skull splitting open and its contents getting crushed, my consciousness—

13,189th time

—gets transferred over.

Instead of having my brains scattered around me, I'm lying on the floor of our classroom. My classmates are busy preparing for the festival.

I sit up and put down the recorder that I was holding.

"Ah, gh..."

What I saw right before I died makes my heart beat wildly. I can't shake the cold sweats. I could throw up at any moment.

I certainly don't want to go through *that* a second time ... but I'll probably have no other choice.

After all—

"It worked."

I managed to retain my memory, which is the minimum requirement to fight against this world. Without that ability, I would waste the entire day enjoying myself. I'd become yet another gear within this meaningless world.

In order to prevent that, I have to commit pseudo-suicide.

I struggle to my feet and rest my elbows against a cloth-covered table.

A long time ago, I was taken in by O. I don't remember when that happened, but it was ages ago. My memory of that time has faded and feels foreign to me, like watching a movie. I have been repeating this day—the day of the school festival—for a very long time, trapped within an illusion of happiness.

I have no idea how many loops have already occurred. I only had that information during my time in the Rejecting Classroom, because Maria had been able to keep track.

I may have repeated this day over 10,000 times already. Perhaps I'm starting to become part of this world. I have no way to tell.

I forgot how the real world feels, and can't differentiate this world from the real one. That I became aware of the truth borders on a miracle.

If I neglect to retain my memory, my doubts about this world will eventually disappear entirely. If that happens, this happy festival will repeat itself thousands upon thousands of times.

The same day will repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and melt me and swallow me like an old piece of chewing gum that has lost all flavor.

—How is that different from death?

"Uh ... ah—"

Fear.

The fear of losing my purpose, of having the meaning of my life painted over.

But even that fear will eventually fade.

"Gh...!"

Angst-ridden, I rush out of the classroom. I hear Kokone calling out to me, but I couldn't care less. I have to put a stop to this repeating world.

It's easy enough to run away from school and the festive mood surrounding it, but I quickly come to a stop.

I don't know where to go. In fact, I don't have anything even vaguely resembling a clue.

In the Rejecting Classroom, our goal was to locate the *owner*. This time, however, there is no owner to begin with. At most, you could say that Maria herself is the owner, since I was consumed by O—a part of the Flawed Bliss.

That being said, Maria does not exist in this world. She can't be found.

"But—"

This world is connected to Maria, so there might be a hint somewhere.

"I have to find a fragment of Maria!"

If I manage to find one, it's bound to help me come up with a solution.

I ran around town. My first destination was Maria's apartment, which turned out to be empty, just like in the real world. Naturally, there was no peppermint scent to be found. After thoroughly searching the room and realizing there were no clues to be found, I decided to sift through all the places I had visited with Maria.

I went to the park, the game center, the karaoke bar, the shopping mall, the hospital, the amusement park, the restaurants and cafés we ate at—however, I didn't find a single fragment of Maria.

There was no trace of such a thing in this world.

In the end, my aimless meanderings allowed time to fly by, and before long, a red glow started to cover the sky once more.

I must retain my memory, and the time of day when I jumped off the roof during the last loop is drawing near. I'll have to commit pseudo-suicide again.

I don't know the exact time when each repeating day gets reset. My memory could be reset at any point after the time of day of my previous suicide.

I absolutely must jump before that!

Needless to say, unwillingly jumping to one's death is abnormal and comes with great fear.

But I have no other choice.

Actually, there is no need to insist on jumping off a roof nor is there a need to die in the same spot as last time, but my feet still carry me to the roof of our school.

I pass through the gate and head toward the school building. Suddenly, a familiar face stops me.

"Hoshii!"

It's Haruaki. He's walking up to me with a raised eyebrow, pushing a wheelchair.

"Where did you go, Hoshii?! You were in charge of Kasumi today, remember?! Weren't you looking forward to it just as much as she was?! Why, just why...?"

He has every right to be angry with me.

"I-It's all right, Haruaki-kun ... I'm sure there's a good reason!" Mogi-san defends me.

Her words are kind, but she can't hide her disappointment.

—Mogi-san ... I would *love* to switch off my brain and enjoy the festival together with you. I would love to see your smile up close ... but I can't!

I must not adhere to the "role" this world has given me. If I give in to that temptation, I will be trapped here forever.

Suppressing my feelings, I ask, "Do you know Maria? Maria Otonashi?"

"...Is this the time for questions, Hoshii...? Who the hell is that?" Haruaki says harshly.

"Does that person have something to do with why you disappeared?"

As I feared, neither of them have any idea of who Maria is.

"Ah ... gh...!"

This is too much to bear. I turn my back to them and run toward the roof.

Jump. I *must* jump! I must die!

—What is so unbearable?

They don't know about Maria. I couldn't sense a trace of Maria in them.

But that's okay—I was prepared for that.

Then why is it that I'm so deeply shattered? Why is it that I'm horribly nervous and distressed? What am I fleeing from?

It's because nothing felt off. Even though my classmates are supposed to know Maria, their ignorance doesn't strike me as strange. Maria seems like a distant fictional character in an unrelated world.

While I, the only one who remembers Maria, appear to be far more false than they do.

Suddenly, I realize something crucial.

Maria.

What kind of girl were you?

I'm starting to forget about Maria ... just how long have I been exposed to the violence of time for this to happen? The time spent in this state of false happiness has already grown heavy enough to squash me.

If I'm going to forget even more about her—then why maintain this lonely struggle at all?

"Hah ... hah ... hah..."

I keep on running as if to shake off my doubts and open the door to the rooftop. A crimson world jumps into view. I don't have much time left.

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

This world is most seductive. I want to stay here.

However, I shake off that thought.

I won't waver. I don't want to waver. I mustn't waver. Without leaving myself any room for doubt, I climb the fence and stand on top of it.

I jump.

I fall, and I spread the insides of my head all over the ground again.



13,190th time

After returning to the morning classroom and confirming that I still have my memory, I stand up.

However, I'm immediately attacked by a fit of dizziness. My hand is trembling as I hold my forehead. The pseudo-suicides are seriously damaging my mind.

—How long am I going to have to keep this up?

I shake my head to free myself from my qualms. I mustn't think about them any more, or I'll be drowning within these loops before I know it.

"...Okay."

I'll sift through everyone at school this time. I'll walk around and interrogate anyone who associated with Maria.

No doubt I'll earn much resentment for wandering around instead of tending to Mogi-san. I'll do it anyway ... I have to.

"—Ha!"

I look up at the crimson sky as I lean against the door to the rooftop. The day has ended fruitlessly once more.

I continued my attempts at interrogation until I was despised by the entire class for deeply upsetting Mogi-san, but the end result was still a disastrous failure. No one knew about Maria, and no one provided any clues.

"—Heh, haha!"

I can only laugh. I'm horribly exhausted. I can't even walk straight because the lack of sleep is wearing me down. I want to rest. I don't want to think anymore. I want to escape. I just want to escape. I want to go to the school festival together with Mogi-san, even for just one day.

But I can't.

I won't be able to resist these loops if I savor the sweet taste of happiness once more.

So, it's time to jump again.

It's time to commit suicide.

"...This is so fucked up."

—What kind of logic is that? Why do I have to repeatedly suffer such pain?
Is it really worth it?

Cutting off that train of thought, I jump off the roof.

Splash. I spill the contents of my head once again.



13,191st time

I retained my memory, but I can't muster the willpower to stand up. I want to act, but neither my body nor my heart will listen to me.

Give me just a grain of hope, even if it's dimmer than a tiny nightlight. I just want to take a step forward.

I force my leaden limbs into motion and stand up.

However, once again I was unable to make any progress, and end up lying on my back on the roof.

No one seems to know Maria. There is no trace of her existence.

"Uh ... ghu..."

I tear up. I don't want to jump off the roof anymore. I don't want to suffer anymore. I don't want to sadden Mogi-san anymore. I'm fed up with everything.

But since giving up is not an option, I jump again. Splash. I spill out the contents of my head.

Just kill me for good already!

13,192nd time

But my life continues, and so does the chain of memories. Even though my pain is self-inflicted, I can't help wailing out loud and making myself the center of attention.

"God. Dammit—!" I curse after crying myself out and wiping away my tears.
"I won't give up!"

There's no way in hell I'm going to give up.

13,201st time

I gaze at the crimson sky from the school rooftop.

How many times did I repeat the same day? Only about ten times, I'm guessing?

There's nothing left for me to do. There are simply no fragments of Maria to be found.

I'm trapped by this loop. There's no way out.

Then what am I supposed to do? Do I still have to continue to fight? Isn't it okay to lose my memories? Haven't I done enough? Haven't I earned some rest?

I'm attacked by thoughts that try to overcome me. The thoughts won't stop. At this point I'm only thinking about fleeing my duty.

And yet I climb the fence. I don't even know if there's any point to this. I don't know if this is the right thing to do. But I'm still chained by my obsession: I must bring Maria back into my life.

I jump off the fence.

I spill the contents of my head.

Hahaha, is there even anything left to spill?

13,445th time

The count has exceeded 250. I died more than 250 times. I see the campfire as I look down at the school grounds. I'm no longer able to recognize any meaning in the Oklahoma Mixer that is playing in the distance.

I killed off my thoughts a while ago because they were getting in my way. Only rarely am I able to form any meaningful thoughts like I am right now. And yet, I jump off the roof once more. The mountain of my dead bodies increases by one.

I don't even think about the reason I'm doing all this anymore.

Splash.

14,590th time

Who's Maria?

I jump off the roof.

Splash.

14,688th time

Corpses. 500 corpses.

This is a mechanism made for Kazuki Hoshino to jump to his death.

14,888th time

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah"

15,233rd time

"

"

18,900th time

"

"

22,000th time

"

"

26,000th time

"

"

27,500th time

"

"

27,756th time

"Ah...? Huh?"

All of a sudden, I regain my grasp of language as I watch the crimson sky from the rooftop.

"...Sunset."

I don't know how long it's been. Having given up on thought, the crimson sky and the act of jumping to my death have become no more than meaningless phenomena to me.

"Beautiful."

The fact that such a normal comment crosses my mind borders on a miracle. I have no idea how many times I've experienced the festival. I don't remember any recent events either.

I've returned to normal for just a moment.

However, it probably really *is* a miracle, and if I let this chance slip, I'm going to return to being a meaningless phenomenon that spends each day aimlessly, just to commit suicide upon spotting the setting sun.

Yeah ... I have to choose now. I have come to commit suicide in order to avoid being trapped in an endless loop, but in the end, I wound up being trapped in a different kind of loop nonetheless. I'm at a dead end and I have to live with it. I have to make the decision to cut through this pointless loop.

I have to stop jumping to my death.

I have to give up on *her*.

Am I really okay with that, I ask my former self. He's the one who resolved to recover *her* and bring her back into his life, and has since withered away. He's the one who is taking control of me in order to jump off the roof.

—Am I okay with that?

Not at all. I want to save her. She's more important to me than anything else. I used to be ready to sacrifice everything, including my life and everyone else's.

But...

But—

—What was her name, again?

My last memories of her have been painted over by the repetitions of this day. If that was the plan of my enemy, then his plan succeeded. The sheer weight of time has driven her out of my head. I can't save her nor is there any point to my actions anymore.

I was defeated in every respect.

"But ... that's okay, right?"

I've fought enough. I haven't kept count of the days that have passed, but I know the number is huge. I must have spent about as much time here as I did in the Rejecting Classroom. If I continue to maintain this futile struggle, I'll only break my own mind.

...No, it's already been broken for a long time.

The only way I can rid myself of my insanity is to discard the memory of this struggle.

Even though I'm aware of this, my legs keep me on the rooftop and try to jump off the fence whenever given the chance. It's become routine for me.

You gotta be kidding! Don't do that! I punch my thighs repeatedly to try to stop my legs from moving. *I'm at my limit! Understand that already! Give up!* Only after the pain renders them unusable, am I able to stop their routine of hurling me to my death.

"Hah ... Hah..."

I force my body to leave the roof, dragging my traitorous legs with me. Breathing heavily, I stagger down the stairs a step at a time.

"Let's go back..."

Let's think about happy things.

"Let's go back..."

Let's think about Mogi-san's smile.

"Let's go back ... to the enjoyable school festival."

I head back to a happy world, even if it's a fictional one.

Opening the entrance door from inside, I enter the schoolyard. I see the campfire. I hear the Oklahoma Mixer.

—It's been so long since I've last been here.

But if I've really returned to this world, then I ought to go to Mogi-san. I should say the words I had to swallow until now.

This will be my farewell to *she* whose name I've forgotten.

As I make up my mind, my legs suddenly feel lighter, as if a curse has been lifted from them. My heart is slowly defrosting after the long period of emptiness.

My heart is occupied by the smile of the girl I love.

"Kazu-kun...?" the girl mutters as she spots me before the fire, and rolls her wheelchair toward me.

"What kept you busy today? You look pale, are you okay? ...If you're okay, would you join me in watching the campfire?" she says with a gentle but somewhat forced smile.

There's no way she wouldn't be sad. After all, even though she was really looking forward to our day together, I broke my promise.

"...I'm sorry," I say.

"Eh...? D-Don't worry yourself, Kazu-kun! I know that you had your reasons..."

"I'm sorry!" I repeat as I cry and cry.

"Erm ... you don't need to apologize so much just for what happened today..."

It wasn't just today. I've neglected you and this world for an incredibly long time. I devoted all my time to *she* whose name I've forgotten instead of you.

I have been betraying this world's Mogi-san non-stop.

But I've decided to live here from now on. Whatever happens here is not just a fleeting phenomenon, but a series of important steps. I can no longer trivialize anything that happens in this world.

I can no longer commit suicide.

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

I can no longer ignore Mogi-san's confession of love.

Her confession has slowly but surely affected me. It changed my heart, which used to be occupied by *she* whose name I've forgotten.

My love for Mogi-san has grown day by day.
Just like it did in a past world of endless loops.

She has been erased by the repetitions of this world.

I wipe away my tears and grab Mogi-san's delicate shoulders.
"K-Kazu-kun...?"
Today I will finally respond to her.

"Kasumi Mogi, I love you."

My tears start to flow again.
"Please stay with me forever."
I will no longer ask her to wait until tomorrow.
Mogi-san is completely flustered by my sudden confession.
I know. Mogi-san didn't confess to me first this time; my confession must have come out of the blue.
Despite that, she flashes a smile.
"Thank you."
She shows me the sunflower-like smile that I love so much.
"I also want to be with you forever!"

We take each other's hands and start to dance a simple Mayim Mayim.^[2] We can't dance properly because of her wheelchair, but I'm satisfied anyway. I'm definitely happy right now.

From now on I will live in this pointless, repeating world. Some people might consider this a bad end, but I'm perfectly happy with it.

I mean, what could be more wonderful than experiencing mutual love for all eternity?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"Haha"

I'm happy.

"Hahahahaha"

"Hahahahahahaha"

"Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha"

[illegible]

And thus, my long, long fight finally came to an end.

If only that were true.



Chapter 2

二章

Chapter

I'm in an unfamiliar town.

More precisely, I'm in an average shopping district that has become rather unpopular because of the country-wide trend toward large shopping malls. What's the name of this town again? ...It doesn't matter, does it? My whereabouts have no relevance to the lonely battle that I'm fighting.

The evening has caused the street to empty out, and in the middle of that street lies a boy in a school uniform, Yukito Tejima. He has passed out and is holding onto a girlish dress-up doll.

Deadlock Among Mirrors. That *box* granted Tejima's desire for "a world containing only him and his ideal girl." He wished for a world dedicated to himself and a girl one year his senior, Suzu Amemiya. However, boxes always incorporate doubts as well. Tejima didn't believe that his wish would really come true, and he also knew that Suzu Amemiya wouldn't want to live with him in such a lonely world. Furthermore, even though he may have wished for seclusion, he didn't truly harbor that desire in his heart of hearts.

Allowing his half-hearted wish to create a box resulted in the mirror maze named "Deadlock Among Mirrors." All he achieved was to lock himself in a house of mirrors with lifesize dolls of Suzu Amemiya that only ever said what he wanted them to say.

I broke into the world he created and wandered through the mirror maze, coming across nothing but soulless dolls. As there were no clues to lead me to a solution, I wound up locked in there longer than I anticipated. My somewhat desperate tactic that eventually superseded the status quo, was to break all the mirrors around me. By ignoring the rules of the maze, I eventually reached Tejima, who was hiding in the center of his world. I persuaded him to give up and took his box.

Only one day has passed in real life, but the subjective time I spent in the box was a year. It would be a lie to say that I'm not tired.

As a side note, Tejima and Suzu Amemiya aren't a couple. In contrast to what Tejima might want to believe, his crush regarded him as nothing more than just another student with whom she had exchanged a few words. While the real Amemiya is somewhat pretty, she is nothing like the perfect girl that I came across in the mirror maze.

His box is emitting a feeble, cheap light as if plastered with silver paper. I drop it on the ground and destroy it by stepping on it. The box, despite its size, broke with hardly any effort on my part.

Now I'll have to start over again.

...How long am I going to keep doing this? How long will I be able to?

"Once again you failed to obtain a box."

I glare at the speaker, who has appeared out of nowhere.

"O!"

He has assumed the appearance of Yukito Tejima's father, but his charming smile has given him away.

"Why do you not give up already? You will never acquire an empty box again, nor would you be able to master it."

"Perhaps. But it doesn't matter; I will continue to seek a box, and I will turn my Flawed Bliss into real bliss. I will make everyone in the world happy."

"And you are willing to sacrifice yourself for that goal?"

"Yes. Because—"

"I am Aya Otonashi."

In response to my firm statement, O flashes a scornful grin and vanishes.

I don't remember how long we've been playing this game of cat-and-mouse. My memory only consists of recent events.

Therefore, all of my prized memories that may have once existed are no longer retrievable.

For example—

"—Ah."

A warm and cozy feeling spreads within my heart as a certain name almost surfaces, but the fragment of a past memory vanishes before I can recall anything.

Oh well, it no longer matters to me, anyway. What point is there to a potentially close relationship in the past when I've forgotten about it? I bet that person is in a new relationship by now and has forgotten about me as well.

"I am—"

Alone.

I've been alone ever since that day.

Completely exhausted, I stagger into a rental apartment in a business hotel and collapse onto my bed. However, I can't fall asleep.

My head hurts as if it were beaten by a hammer. My body has suffered from my lengthy struggle against boxes; I feel like bursting from within at any moment. If I cry for help, the monster that is emptiness will jump at my throat and devour me.

I'm at my limit. I've long been at my limit.

I crawl over to my bag, take out my scented oil, and pour some onto a tissue.

The fragrance of peppermint. Strangely enough, I can fall asleep while surrounded by that scent. My body must have learned somewhere to be soothed by the scent of peppermint.

My consciousness starts to fade.

Moments later, I dive into a past that I can only remember in my dreams.



My sister, Aya Otonashi, could predict the future.

She would identify the culprit in less than ten minutes when we watched a detective show. She would predict the contents of the dinner that our housekeeper, Yoshida-san, prepared for us every day. She would predict the couples who would start dating in her class. She predicted when her teacher would quit his job.

Whenever one of her predictions came true, I became more and more fascinated with her. Her "prophecies" struck me as mysterious magic, and as the magician, she topped it all off with her outstanding intelligence and beauty.

I was proud to be the little sister of such a perfect person, especially because I was no one special myself.

However—Aya-oneechan also predicted something about me. Something dreadful.

It happened on a winter day when I was 12 years old. It was freezing cold, and the wind was rattling the windows all around us. I had just come home from school and was still wearing my coat. The first thing I did was run into my sister's room to warm up. Her room proved to be as hot as I expected,

causing me to smile in contentment. It was filled with a peculiar fragrance that consisted of a mix of various scented oils and perfumes.

That seemingly random mix of scents was somehow in perfect harmony. It was the smell of my beloved sister.

Unlike my room, which was furnished in an utterly normal way, hers had all kinds of luxurious furniture that didn't seem appropriate for a child's room. Her chandelier and her antique mirror in particular could have been plucked right out of a fantasy world.

That being said, I thought that an extravagant room like that was a perfect match for Aya-oneechan.

As she watched me take off my coat from her canopy bed, she gave me a serious look for some reason. I tilted my head in response, and she said, "I have to talk with you." Still a bit puzzled, I sat down on the chair before her.

She abandoned her serious look and smiled at me instead. She stood up and embraced my head, and then, she said loud and clearly:

"I will now predict your future, Maria."

With these words, she released my head.

This was the first time she had ever made a prediction involving me. I was somewhat surprised and straightened up immediately.

My sister looked into my eyes and said: "You will become me—you will have to." Seeing that I was completely lost, she continued, "By which I mean that you will have to make others happy."

"Become you? But then what happens to you, Onee-chan?"

She hesitated slightly, but her gaze didn't waver as she answered me.

"Maria, when I'm 14, I will leave this place."

Aya-oneechan ended up dying at the age of 14. She died on her birthday in a traffic accident, together with father and mother.

I was left behind, just as she had predicted.

Ever since then, I have been living as Aya Otonashi in accordance with her prophecy.



I first met Aya-oneechan in the spring of my fourth year. I still vividly remember that day.

"Hey, why is everybody lined up?"

My mother just smiled wordlessly in response to my question. All the members of the household, including the maids, were lined up in front of the main entrance. I had never seen them do this before, so I was somewhat anxious and clung tightly to my mother's hand.

Before long, father pulled through the gate in his Merc and parked right in front of us. A young girl stepped out of the back seat.

Upon noticing us, the girl smiled faintly and bowed her head.

"It is a pleasure to meet you."

Even though there was nothing special about her bearing, I was deeply impressed. We were about the same age and height, and yet I instinctively sensed that she was cut from a different cloth. Her face was perfectly shaped, her legs were slender, and her skin looked as soft as silk—but her aura was even more remarkable than her looks. Despite her young age, she was surrounded by a fragile and melancholic air (not that I would have used those words to describe her back then). I was completely overwhelmed by my encounter with this mysterious girl, and hid behind my mother's back.

"Starting today, she's going to be your big sister," my mother explained.

My big sister? This girl? How is that even possible?

When I looked around, I saw that everyone, including mother, was welcoming her. It seemed like they were pleasantly surprised by her precocious politeness. *Maybe it's only obvious to kids like me that she's not normal?* I thought to myself.

However, that perfect first impression Aya-oneechan had made on everyone did not last long.

After father got out of the car and had his chauffeur park it in the garage, she said something that left everyone speechless.

"Would you please kneel before me?" she commanded in a tone that sounded nothing like a child's voice.

At first my father thought she was kidding. The little girl was making jokes, everyone thought.

Aya-oneechan, however, continued emphatically, "Apologies are in order. One for me, separated from her mother because of your promiscuity, one for my new mother, who is now obliged to bring me up, and one for my

sister, who now has to deal with having a half-sister. So kneel down before us."

She fixed her gaze on father, signaling that she wouldn't set foot in her new home until he obeyed her demands. He could have just laughed off her requests; she was only a four-year-old girl, after all!

"Kneel down, please."

But that was out of the question.

He was not allowed to make light of the matter in the face of her seriousness. If he made the wrong decision, she would never again believe in the bonds of family. I—no, everyone present sensed that.

What was really strange in hindsight, was that everyone agreed that there was only one solution: father had to kneel down before her.

Eventually, he got on his knees and lowered his head.

"...I'm sorry."

It was an unbelievable scene. A high-ranking executive at a large finance firm who was used to barking orders, was prostrating himself before his 4-year-old daughter in front of his family and his servants, his face contorted with humiliation.

"Thank you. Now I am able to live here."

That incident did not, however, undermine his authority as a father. Aya-oneechan was generally well-behaved and listened to her parents. She made no further attempts to injure father's dignity.

However, in retrospect, she had been the real ruler of the family from the day of her arrival.

Our family must have been dancing to her tune all along.

Her pitiful circumstances also drove my parents cut her some slack.

We were a family of four: a father, Michishige, a mother, Yukari, an elder sister, Aya, and a younger sister, Maria. Aya-oneechan and I were half-sisters, and she was only 3 months older.

Five years after Michishige-san (I used to refer to him by name because both mother and sister did so) had lost his first wife, Yoriko-san, to illness, he married Aya-oneechan's birth mother and former celebrity Rinko-san.

Her exceptional beauty, which was said to charm any man, must have drawn him to her.

Their relationship did not last long. Rinko-san was not a family-oriented person, nor did she love Michishige-san (at least according to him). He searched for comfort outside his family and had an affair with Yukari, a recent high school graduate who had just started working as a receptionist at his finance firm. Before long, he got Yukari pregnant; at the same time, his wife Rinko-san was three months pregnant with Aya-oneechan.

After securing enough alimony and child support to live quite comfortably, Rinko-san readily accepted a divorce. She got custody of Aya-oneechan, who had just been born, and Michishige-san married my mother just before I was born.

Apparently, Michishige-san and Rinko-san stayed in touch after their divorce. He even went to see Aya-oneechan from time to time after getting permission to do so from my mother (Yukari). Eventually, after Aya-oneechan turned four, Rinko-san asked him to take full custody of their daughter.

Michishige-san accepted immediately. It was rumored that he had heard from a third party that Aya-oneechan was being neglected.

Aya-oneechan never talked much about Rinko-san. I only remember that she once darkly jested: "She told me that I should have never been born!"

Since I had minimal contact with Rinko-san, I can't say if Aya-oneechan was telling the truth. However, she certainly appeared to be a "pitiful child" to most people.

I suppose my parents tried to make it up to her by being much more permissive with her than with me, although they were still rather strict with both of us. They gave her a luxurious room, they bought her all the toys she wanted, and she had the right to pick her candy before I got to. In order to protect her from rumors, she was even sent to a different school than I was.

It would be a lie to say that I wasn't bitter about that kind of treatment back then. On the other hand, I could definitely tolerate it.

After all, my mother always said to me:

"I'm so happy that you were born."

She said it all the time.

"You kept Michishige-san and me together. You're my angel."

I was so proud whenever she told me that.

If my mother hadn't been pregnant with me, Michishige-san might not have divorced Rinko-san, and the affair might have just fizzled out. Michishige-san would often tell us that he had become a reformed man thanks to my mother's deep and abiding love. I thought they were a truly happy couple and wanted to one day become as happily married as they were.

I was the foundation of our family.

Yeah.

Maybe nothing bad would have happened if that had actually been true.



It was so broiling hot on the first day of my first summer vacation in middle school, that just walking around indoors made my underwear sweaty and stick to my skin. I hated that feeling, and resolved to spend my entire vacation in air-conditioned environments. Wild horses couldn't have dragged me outside.

I had finally been freed from school, and on top of that, I had neither private lessons nor piano lessons on my schedule. To savor this taste of perfect bliss, I got comfy on my bed and turned on my handheld game console. I was determined not to do *anything* for the entire day.

Because of that, I didn't care at all when I heard the doorbell. It wasn't for me, at any rate, since no one would drop by unannounced to visit me.

Nevertheless, someone knocked on my door shortly thereafter. I could immediately tell who it was.

"Aya-oneechan?"

I got out of bed and opened the door. As I expected, it was my sister. She was wearing a gorgeous white dress.

Ever since she had turned 13, no one called her 'cute' anymore. She had become a bewitching beauty who caught everyone's eye. While her build and her face were still immature, her extraordinary aura completely overwhelmed those shortcomings.

"Was that actually for me?" I asked. "Did I get a package?"

"No, it was a guest of mine."

Seeing me cock my head, Aya-oneechan gently stroked my long hair. I had grown my hair long just to emulate her, so I was always happy when she touched it.

"I am going to invite that guest into my room. I want you to be there with me, Maria."

"Huh? I have to meet that person?"

It was the first time she asked me for anything like that. Since we went to different schools, we had no friends in common ... or to be more precise, I had no friends at all.

"Yes. You need to witness what is about to happen."

"...What do you mean?"

Without saying another word—probably because an explanation would have taken too long—she grabbed my hand and dragged me out of my room. I was accustomed to her bossy attitude, so I gave in and followed her.

"Ah, right! Here is one of those 'prophecies' that you love so much," she said and turned back to me. "Candy will be taken."

I once again inclined my head. Aya-oneechan was being even more cryptic than usual. My attempts to ask for clarification were silently ignored with a smile.

"You're always doing whatever you feel like with m—EW!"

"Hm? What's the matter?" she asked.

Averting my eyes, I pointed at the eight-legged creature that was scaring me.

She smiled and said, "It's just a spider." She proceeded to pick it up with her bare hands, then watched it crawl around.

"A-Aren't you scared?"

"Hm? There is nothing it can do to us, is there? It's actually quite cute. I love how its body seems so perfectly constructed."

With these words, Aya-oneechan smiled and—

"—Ah..."

...squashed the spider in her fist.

"...Why did you do that?" I asked in surprise as I stared into her eyes.

"Because that spider was here without my permission."

I was somewhat worried about who she was going to introduce me to, but the person waiting for us was a completely normal boy who didn't mesh well with the atmosphere of her room at all. He wasn't ugly, but compared to Aya-oneechan, he was just a run-of-the-mill kind of guy.

There was a serious look on his face, and dark circles under his eyes indicated that he hadn't been sleeping well.

"Hello," he said as he smiled and shed much of his tired demeanor. Like most of the students attending Aya-oneechan's private school, he must have enjoyed a good upbringing.

I, on the other hand, was unable to respond properly to him, and just looked down at the floor. I wasn't trying to be rude, but I simply wasn't comfortable dealing with boys my own age.

Without acting offended in the least, he turned to Aya-oneechan and said, "Here's what you wanted."

"Thank you," she said as she took a notebook from him.

He started to look in my direction.

"Err, Aya-san? Why's your sister here?"

"Don't worry. She won't do anything."

"...So it's all right if she hears us?"

"Of course."

Despite my sister's comments, he couldn't help but glance at me from time to time. Well, I was a total stranger, after all.

...I'm uncomfortable. I wanna go back and play some more games... I thought to myself.

"Actually, would you mind explaining the situation to her?" Aya-oneechan asked.

"...How much does she know about the situation at our school?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing at all...? So explain everything from the very beginning?"

She nodded.

Apparently, she didn't intend to introduce him to me. The boy also didn't seem to care about me beyond my identity as her little sister. I started to desperately wonder about why I was even dragged into this.

The still-unidentified boy turned toward me and calmly said, "Okay, let me explain what's happening at our school." I tensed up in response to being stared at by a boy. "See, we have an 'enemy.'"

"...An enemy?" I mindlessly repeated the forbidding word that I'd just heard.

"Right. There is a group of girls in our class led by a girl called Yamashita. They are our 'enemy.'"

I raised an eyebrow. "Enemy" was too strong a word to use for a classmate. Normally, a phrase like "not getting along" or "not being able to stand them" would be more appropriate, especially coming from someone so well-bred.

"Yamashita's group is trying to drive Aya-san out of our school, and we're not talking about relatively harmless stuff like slander and the silent treatment. They are actively seeking out teachers and parents, collecting signatures, boycotting the classes of teachers who defend Aya-san, and spreading false rumors about her. It got to the point where a member of their clique ran for vice-president of the school council on a platform of forcing Aya-san to transfer to another school. Anyway, you have to understand that this is not a class-only dispute, but rather a school-wide one."

I had no idea. She had never mentioned anything to me, nor had she seemed troubled.

Quite the opposite—

I looked at Aya-oneechan's face. She was still smiling peacefully.

"..."

Quite the opposite; she had been in a good mood lately.

"According to the enemy, our class has been disrupted by Aya-san. They claim that Aya-san is disturbing the natural order and that everything would return to normal if she were gone."

Aya-oneechan shrugged it off, saying that "They are right insofar as every class I'm part of becomes abnormal, at least in my experience."

She was telling the truth; her class environments would always take a turn for the bizarre. Once, a fanatical admirer stalked her and broke into our house, armed with a knife. This was a good example of the types of problems that her incredible charm could cause.

Having a major impact on your environment is a natural consequence of being 'special.'

"But Aya-san didn't do anything wrong! They're the ones who started it, and as soon as they were about to get in trouble, they blamed it all on Aya-san! It's a charade! They're not right in the head!"

I slowly grasped the situation.

Things likely started small; Yamashita and her friends probably resented Aya-oneechan because the boys in her class were obsessed with her or because of favoritism from some teachers. The girls must have ganged up on her in response. Normally, the story would end right there because a single person has no chance against a large group.

However, they were opposing Aya-oneechan. She never yields to anyone.

Besides, Aya-oneechan naturally has plenty of allies. As a result, the number of allies and enemies kept escalating and intensified the problem.

Once the ball got rolling, that group of girls couldn't just back off either, even if they wanted to, because the situation had taken on a life of its own. You can't stop fighting if people behind you are pushing you into a conflict.

As a result, the matter got worse and worse.

Aya-oneechan always had many friends and foes, and trouble followed her wherever she went. This time, however, the trouble had grown too great to shrug it off as just the norm. After all, the entire school was involved.

"To think that they are trying to threaten Aya-san into transferring when she hasn't done anything wrong ... they're evil!" hissed the boy.

And to make matters worse—

There was real madness in his eyes.

"I'll teach them a lesson ... I'll kill them!"

The words he said are often used figuratively and hyperbolically, but in this case they bore an entirely different weight. He clearly meant them literally. He was actually considering violence.

"Didn't I tell you that I don't approve of violence?"

"But Aya-san...! They'll only learn the hard way!"

"Be honest with me: Did you come here today to get my approval for violent acts?" Aya-oneechan asked.

The boy remained silent.

"Once you use force, you will automatically be the one at fault, no matter what your enemy has done. It's always like this. Violence is not a solution."

"Fuck...! But then what should we do...?!" he squeezed out as he looked down and clenched his fists. "...I want to kill them ... kill them ... kill, kill, and kill them!"

I was terrified; he was sincerely wishing for the deaths of their enemies. His state of mind was easily "murderous."

"...Ugh..." I uttered as I imagined a classroom filled with murderous intent.

A single cup of that sort of feeling was more than sufficient to cause nausea; if it were to fill an entire classroom, there was no way a normal school life could be maintained. The mere presence of such aggressive feelings would preclude a healthy everyday life.

In that case, I thought, the situation is hopeless.

A terrible incident was going to occur that even Aya-oneechan couldn't stop.

My body started to tremble.

Why ... why did Aya-oneechan want me to see this...?

They continued to talk, but the more I heard, the more frightened I became of his unnatural behavior.

After their abnormal conversation had finally come to an end, we saw him off outside the entry gate.

I was treated politely from start to finish. He seemed to behave normally around everyone except for his "enemies" and "Aya Otonashi."

"Ah, right. Please take this," Aya-oneechan said before he left, handing him a paper bag.

"What is this?"

"You said that you cannot sleep, right? I picked out scented oils and some other items that will help you get some rest. Use whatever you see fit. I also included a note on their uses."

"Th ... Thank you so much!"

I was stunned; he had been moved to tears because of such a small gesture, and was now weeping.

His feelings toward my sister were anything but normal. They had transcended love entirely.

If anything ... they were feelings of worship.

I escaped into my room, dove under my blanket because I didn't want to think anymore, and focused on playing games.

But I sensed clearly: I could not escape.

One week after his visit, I was shaken awake in the middle of the night. "What's the matter?" I asked, but Aya-oneechan wouldn't give me a proper explanation and proceeded to unbutton my pajamas.

After I had finished changing into my regular clothes, she took me outside and caught a taxi. The address she provided was about one train station away.

"What are we going to do there?"

Aya-oneechan didn't answer.

After we had gotten out of the taxi, Aya-oneechan looked around carefully and pulled me into the bicycle parking lot for an apartment complex. We then ducked down as if we were trying to stay in hiding.

"Onee-chan ... explain to me what's going on!"

"You will understand in a few moments."

"Onee-chan! Jus—" She interrupted my bawling by pressing her index finger against my lips. I gave in and decided to wait in silence.

After about five minutes, a group of four people assembled before one of the houses in front of us. The shadiness of their behavior was immediately apparent; they were all wearing black jerseys to avoid attracting attention.

"...Ah," I whispered quietly. I recognized one of the figures who was wearing a cap. It was the boy who had come to our house the other day.

I was getting a very bad feeling about the entire situation.

"Let's do this," one of them said.

"Yeah!"

Two of them kept watch, while the boy I'd recognized and one other person approached the house. They were carrying plastic containers and started to toss their contents all over the walls.

I noticed the peculiar, penetrating smell of oil.

Is this ... lamp oil?

—No way, are they going to...?!

Once I realized what they were up to, I leaned forward and read the name plate of the house they were covering with the oil.

"Yamashita"

"Onee-cha—mghn...!"

She covered my mouth.

—Why? They were about to commit arson in the middle of the night! There were probably people inside and the fire department would take some time to arrive. If worst came to worst, the inhabitants might die. Why wasn't Aya-oneechan stepping in?

While I was struggling with my confusion, the preparations continued. The two people who had scattered the lamp oil nodded to each other and produced a few pieces of newspaper. After putting them down by the walls of the house, they drenched the paper in more oil.

They ignited their lighters. If the flames touched the paper—it would be all over.

"...Mm! Mmm!"

She must have a plan, I was sure, but I could no longer stand by idly.

I shook off her restraining hands and screamed:

"STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!"

But I was too late. The pieces of newspaper had already been lit and the fire was spreading. The wooden building, covered in lamp oil, was swallowed by the flames in no time at all.

Having heard my scream, the culprits all turned toward me. At first, the two people who had been keeping watch seemed to be confused by the appearance of a witness, but they decided to run away. The other person next to the boy with the cap also paused for a moment but then rushed off at full speed.

Only the familiar boy remained.

He knew who I was, and gazed at me with widened eyes.

"...What is Aya-san's sister doing here...?" he stammered. Aya-oneechan then stood up and showed herself. "...A-Aya-san...!"

She took out her cellphone without saying a word and dialed the emergency number. Meanwhile, I was ringing the Yamashitas' doorbell like crazy while shouting, "The house is on fire! Get out of there! Get out!" and proceeded to hammer my fist against the door. Since there was no reaction, I switched

back to ringing the doorbell. At last, I got through to the mother and urged her to evacuate the home ASAP.

After Aya-oneechan had finished making her phone call, the boy with the cap approached her and said, "A-Aya-san, you must get away from here, quick! You'll be mistaken for an accomplice if you stay here!"

Watching the flames dance, she let out a sigh.

"You needn't worry about that. My sister here will testify to my innocence. More importantly, did I not tell you that you must not resort to violence?"

"But! There was no other way...!"

He looked even more exhausted than he had the previous week. His face indicated that he was completely exhausted.

"You did all this for my sake. As such, I cannot avert my eyes from this incident and will accept full responsibility."

"No! We are entirely to blame! You have nothing to do with this incident!"

"I'm afraid nobody will think so. Do I have to spell it out for you? You have caused me great trouble. Irrevocably so."

His eyes widened in shock.

"...I-I have caused you ... trouble...? No, this mustn't be...!" he stuttered as though it was the end of the world. "Uh, ew...!"

He fell on his knees and burst into tears.

"EWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" he screamed and wailed.

"..."

The scene before my eyes left me thunderstruck.

—What the hell?

I felt nauseated. This was so wrong. I felt like I was watching a cheap melodrama.

First off, I knew that Aya-oneechan could have stopped him at any point. She deliberately failed to intervene. If I hadn't cried out, she might have waited until the house had burnt down.

In other words, Aya-oneechan had waited for him to commit a crime.

What's the meaning of this?

I looked at her ... and held my breath.

Aya-oneechan was smiling despite this terrible situation. But that wasn't the problem. What was far, far more disturbing was that—

—I was charmed by her smile.

I had lost my equilibrium. The burning house before me was clearly bizarre. Out of place. Not fitting into any sort of everyday life.

And Aya-oneechan was to blame.

The disputes in Aya-oneechan's class stopped after that incident ... which was unsurprising, since the two key people involved in the dispute left school.

Yamashita-san's home had almost completely burned down. Before moving away, she came to Aya-oneechan and begged for forgiveness. The boy with the cap, on the other hand, tried to kill himself by taking an overdose of sleeping pills before the police came for him. The pills were in the paper bag my sister had given him.

However, he didn't suffer from an overdose. He was successfully arrested as the main culprit in the arson, even as he wondered why he was still alive.

It was only natural that he didn't die from the sleeping pills Aya-oneechan had given him. The "pills" he had taken didn't contain sedatives or anything like that; rather, they were just some cheap 70-yen candies from the convenience store around the corner.

However, until she told him otherwise, he would not believe that the candies were anything other than sleeping pills because she had labeled them as such. The label alone had been enough to convince him.

Despite her deception, he interpreted it as an attempt to keep him from committing suicide. In the end, he gave his thanks to the very person who drove him into committing the crime in the first place.

...Ah, right. Aya-oneechan's prophecy.

"Candy will be taken."

She had predicted the future once more.



In my dreams, a spider was spinning sticky webs that would never release anyone unfortunate enough to get caught. The spider would never rush. It would slowly devour any prey that got caught in its web, all the while emitting a paralyzing poison from its fangs that would delight the victim. Indulged by a sweet illusion, the prey would be gradually consumed. *Oh ... is*

the spider feasting on a person? Is the victim wearing a cap? Or is it Yamashita-san? ...No.

It was me.

I was squirming in rapture as the spider devoured me, as it nibbled away on my fingers, my legs, my head—even as it started eating its way into my insides.

"...H ... ah ... hah ... hah!"

I woke up.

Ever since that incident, I had been haunted by nightmares on a nightly basis.

"I must get an answer..."

Why had Aya-oneechan shown me such an awful scene? What was the point of doing that?

I knew that until I got an answer, I wouldn't be able to get rid of my nightmares, but I lacked the courage to pursue that answer.

"Ew..." I uttered while holding my head. My head was aching horribly from my lack of sleep. I covered my eyes with my hands and recalled Aya-oneechan's face.

I recalled that—incredibly charming smile.

While I couldn't predict exactly what would happen, I knew that we would no longer be normal sisters once I asked her for an answer.

It was a muggy summer night. I immediately started to sweat once I left my air-conditioned room. The abrupt change of temperature gave me a brief fit of dizziness and breathlessness.

I had come to a decision.

Summoning up my courage, I knocked on Aya-oneechan's door. Never before had I knocked on this door while in such a gloomy mood. Normally, I would be excited because of my deep love and affection for my sister.

There was no response, but I entered the room nonetheless.

I was greeted by a mix of various scented oils—the smell that never failed to calm me down.

When I looked at the bed in that dark room, I saw Aya-oneechan lying on her side with her back turned toward me.

"Onee-chan," I said.

She turned around and looked at me. Her clear, jewel-like eyes stared back at me. That alone was enough to make my thoughts an open book.

"Come here," she said as she beckoned me over to her bed.

I'm sure that under normal circumstance, I would have happily leapt at her invitation.

"What's wrong, Maria?" she asked when she noticed that I wasn't budging.

"Um, you know ... I was meaning to ask..." I said, clenching my fists. "W-What was that all about?"

"Hm...? Do you want to know why I showed you that incident? Is that your question?"

I nodded.

"Maria. I have been answering your question all this time. Ever since I came to this house, I have been telling you that I am only seeking to achieve one thing."

"Is that—"

There is one thing that Aya-oneechan was always talking about from when I first met her. It was her utopian pipe dream.

"I want to make everyone in the world happy."

What she said matched my expectations word for word.

I shook my head.

"I don't get it, Onee-chan ... what you did caused the exact opposite of happiness ... no?"

"On the surface, yes. But Maria ... you haven't heard about how my class has behaved after that incident, have you?"

"Huh?"

"My class was in an abnormal state. I was the source of great conflict that caused a stifling atmosphere. My classmates must have felt horrible. Eventually, those hard feelings spread out throughout our school and the problem could no longer be ignored, since everyone was involved. Everyone was thinking about a way to settle the dispute. And here's the question, Maria: Why did all this happen?"

She had said more than enough for me to figure out the answer.

"Because of my guidance."

Yes, that was the underlying truth. She had deliberately aggravated the problem.

"But that big problem collapsed all at once after that incident happened. The students are enjoying their school life to its fullest now that they have finally been released from their worries," she explained with a gentle smile. "By confronting them with such a problem, they also gained a lot of life experience. I am sure that they will never again make a similar mistake. In effect, I increased their happiness by provoking this incident and made sure that their lives will proceed more smoothly in the future."

I pictured how all the students in her classroom, and even her teachers, smiled awkwardly around Aya-oneechan.

...I didn't know whether or not that could be called "happiness," but there was a more crucial issue to be raised anyway.

"But to get there, you ruined that boy with the cap and Yamashita-san ... no, you must have brought ill fortune to many other people, didn't you?"

"The number of people who have become happy is greater than the number who have become unhappy. But your objection is absolutely valid. Since my goal is to make everyone in the world happy, there should be no sacrifices. I had to resort to such measures because of my incompetence," she explained.

"So you can live with sacrifices like making someone a criminal or having someone's house burnt down?!"

"Even though I might not be able to approve of such a sacrifice, if it leads to more people being happy, I will always choose it. Besides, the experience I gained will open up new possibilities in the future."

"That's wrong ... that's just wrong...!"

A normal person wouldn't make such a decision; this was just plain wrong. Aya-oneechan seemed to lack something on an emotional level.

"How is it wrong? Would you mind elaborating? All I'm saying is that I will sacrifice 10 people if it saves 100 people, even though I'm not content with that solution."

"B-But ... it's still wrong!"

I was sure that she was wrong. I had confidence in my morals, but I couldn't produce a convincing argument. All I could do was shake my head like a little child.

"Urm ... urm...! There should have been another way...! I can't think of anything offhand but someone as smart as you should have no problem

finding a way, Onee-chan! For instance ... could you not use positive feelings like trust and affection to make everyone happy in some way?"

"I tried that in elementary school."

"Huh?"

"The lessons I learned were that giving people what they want only results in temporary delight, and that you can only make a select few people happy that way."

"...I don't know what you mean!"

"I suppose words alone do not suffice. Fine. Would you open the drawer of my desk? The one at the top."

Anxiety made me stay put; whatever I was going to find would shatter all of my beliefs.

Since I wasn't moving, Aya-oneechan stood up. She turned on the chandelier and opened the top drawer of her desk.

From the drawer, she produced a notebook and handed it to me. It was the notebook the boy with the cap had given her when he came to our house. "I had him steal it for me, but don't tell anyone," she said with a grin. Even a comment like that wasn't surprising to me anymore.

The notebook was titled "Diary."

"Go ahead, read it."

I had a bad feeling about this, but I did as she said and started reading the diary.

"It's a forbidden love."

The diary started with that line and, while not mentioning the name of the beloved, was clearly about Aya-oneechan. The notebook was completely focused on her.

He wrote that it was love at first sight, but that he decided that he was not allowed to confess his feelings. However, because she had noticed his stares and responded with interest, he became unable to suppress his feelings. The diary then described how delighted he was when he invited her on a date and got an OK. The date went "splendidly." He was ready to devote the rest of his life to her. He confessed his love and they started going out. The diary also contained a number of poorly written poems and observations concerning love.

I turned pale while reading the diary. The blind love described therein struck me as incredibly repulsive. Even though the author was watching Aya-oneechan all the time, he lacked the slightest understanding of her. It was as if he had made up a character description for some pretty doll named Aya.

But worst of all, I knew about the ultimate outcome.

"Maria," my sister whispered. "I could make a single man happy if I wanted, but I realized that nothing could be further from my true goal."

The diary started to take an alarming turn.

He wrote about how Aya-oneechan treated him coldly even though they were a couple. His love for her had somehow been noticed by the entire class, it became a huge problem at staff meetings, everyone in his class started to ignore him, and Aya-oneechan was the one who spread the rumors about their love.

The writing was no longer meticulous; it had turned into a furious scrawl.

The diary went on to say that he was rejected when he asked her to marry him one day. Apparently, his proposal had been recorded and the recording of him proposing to an elementary school girl was spread about in class. Everyone—the students, their guardians, his workmates—started giving him dirty looks. He was urged to quit his job, and his parents disowned him. And then he broke into our house.

It was the love diary of Aya-oneechan's class teacher from her sixth year of elementary school. It ended with the following scrawl:

"I'll kill Aya Otonashi."

The ferocious feelings dwelling inside the diary left me nauseated; I flashed back to that horrible break-in in far greater detail.

However, I couldn't blame him.

After all, my sister had predicted that "her class teacher would quit his job."

In other words—she had seduced her teacher when she was in elementary school and cornered him mercilessly.

"...W-Why did you do that?!"

"I tried to make him happy. Doesn't he seem happy to you at the start of the diary? Alas, he was bent on having me all to himself. He did not approve of my attempts to make other people happy. Had I respected his desire to monopolize me, I would have not been able to pursue my goal, and that was out of the question. He was under the delusion that I would not love anyone other than him. It was troublesome to get rid of him; in the end I had to resort to drastic measures."

Aya-oneechan shook her head weakly.

"As you can see, the experiment was a failure. But at the same time, I got to know the close connection between love and hate, and learned that I could fine-tune my control of others by making use of both feelings. I stopped concerning myself with individuals and instead tried to tackle my goal in a roundabout way by making use of hate. In fact, this approach yielded the best results so far! That being said ... the solution is still far from sufficient. I have a long way to go until I reach my ideal, but I won't stop here."

She pressed her lips together with strong resolve.

"I will continue to search for a way to make every single person in the world happy."

After making that declaration, Aya-oneechan smiled at me.

—Ah.

I finally understood why her smile had struck me as so charming back then.

It was because—

—Aya-oneechan was a true saint.

It might not be obvious at a first glance. After all, she didn't hesitate to sacrifice others and the virtuousness of her achievements was debatable. On top of that, she was clearly acting unethically.

However, her actions weren't driven by a single grain of her own desires.

She had set aside her personal desires and was only concerned with the welfare of everyone else.

I have to admit that I genuinely saw her mindset as beautiful.

Aah ... am I also strange for thinking that?

"I got what you are trying to do ... I think. But you haven't answered my question, Onee-chan!"

"Yes, you are right. I have yet to explain exactly why I showed you what I've been doing. But if you think about it, didn't I once predict something relevant?"

Predict.

"You will become me—you will have to."

The thought of the meaning behind that prophecy had me a-tremble.

Aya-oneechan gently touched my lips. "You will also live for the happiness of others, just like me. I wanted you to learn from me."

Me? I will do the same things as her? Abandoning my personal desires and feelings for the sake of the world?

"B-But that's impossible for me!"

I was not a superhuman like my sister. I was a weak child who could not even attend school properly because I was unable to blend in.

"This is not an issue of 'impossible or not.' You cannot defy your destiny."

"W-Why?! Isn't it enough if one of us is doing these things?! Don't get me involved!" I yelled in denial.

Aya-oneechan sighed in response, "...I was unsure whether I should say this or not, but it seems like there is no way around this matter."

"W-What do you mean...?"

"You kept Michishige-san and me together. You're my angel," she said, quoting my mother.

Those were the words that had always been my greatest reassurance.

"W-What of it...? Why bring up those words now...?"

"There seems to be love in those words. They seem to be the exact opposite of what my mother told me. But is that really the case? I mean, if you put it another way, you get:"

"You served your purpose once you were born."

My mother's words had formed the bedrock of my security. My entire identity was built on those words.

There was no way my bedrock would break with a single sentence.

"——Ah..."

—And yet.

"Ew ... AAAAAH..."

I could not withstand this assault.

A single sentence was enough to shatter the one thing that had sustained me.

Like a house of cards, it all fell apart, never to be restored.

Aah ... it happened so quickly, I must have had suspicions all along. I must have sensed that my parents didn't care about me. I must have sensed the true message behind those words of "love."

"—U ... gh..."

It wasn't like I had been mistreated or subjected to excessive restrictions. There was absolutely nothing tangible that I could complain about to my parents.

But I could not deny that we were nothing but unneeded annoyances for Michishige-san and mother.

Right—

We were not needed.

Aya-oneechan cuddled my head in her arms and comforted me.

"You are special, Maria," she said while embracing me in a gentler manner than usual. "You are still an untouched, hollow shell. You have boundless possibilities. You are so exceptionally pure that if there were a god that grants *wishes*, he would appear before you, not me.

"However," she added, "that also means that you are empty."

"W-What should I..."

"We are empty, both of us. But if we keep looking for our purpose, we will eventually be able to fill that void in our hearts. Let's make our purpose an enormous one, Maria. Let's make everyone in the world happy. If we succeed, everyone will need us," she said and whispered into my ears: "There will be a meaning to our birth."

However, I muttered, "...Maybe ... I'm gonna find another goal..."

I was not yet willing to devote myself to something like Aya-oneechan had.

"...Hey, Maria. I have the ability to control people to a certain degree, even if I just met them, right?"

"Yeah, you do..."

"How many years have passed since we met, Maria? How many years have we spent under a single roof? How can you be so sure that you have not been influenced by me?"

"...Ah..."

"...Right, Maria. You are already under my control. I have manipulated you to wish for universal happiness. You can resist as much as you want, but in the end you will arrive at the same decision."

She continued:

"Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi."

The instant that she said that, I saw the semi-translucent spider webs. I saw the cobweb of my nightmares that would not let me go.

I was caught up in the cobwebs, unable to escape. I was going to be devoured like the teacher who had written that diary, like the boy with the cap, and like all other people who associated with Aya-oneechan.

She smiled at me.

"Let us begin, Maria! We may not bear a grudge against anyone, but we have a formless enemy who torments our minds. His name is emptiness. Let's show him—"

With a charming, ever so charming smile, she continued:

"How we take revenge!"



Their funeral was held on a rainy day.

I was standing in my school uniform without speaking to anyone, embracing Aya-oneechan's funeral photograph.

When I looked at myself in a mirror, all I saw was an empty shell that could be easily crushed under the lightest of pressure.

"Maria, when I'm 14, I will leave this place!"

Why did she choose to die together with our parents? I wondered. She could no longer achieve her goal, after all.

But clearly, she had planned all this beforehand, or else she wouldn't have predicted it.

In other words, Aya-oneechan had planned all along to entrust me with her ultimate goal of making everyone in the world happy. That's why she had made me witness the arson incident and showed me the diary.

She must have come to the conclusion that she had finished transferring her mandate to me.

On her 14th birthday, Aya-oneechan manipulated the hatred of her former teacher so that he'd cause an accident that killed all parties involved.

Revenge.

She had said to take revenge.

Aya-oneechan must have loathed her family for creating the inner emptiness that tormented her. Taking revenge on them was another goal of hers that she never told me about. She had planned for their deaths from the very beginning.

I was also a part of the family that she wanted to take revenge on, but in my case, she did not avenge herself through murder, but by taking my heart captive.

As proof of that, I had nowhere else to go.

My relatives were busy making a fuss about who was to take the cursed child of an affair, who was to inherit the money, who was to inherit the house, who was to inherit the other property, and so on. The inheritance dispute that occurred outside of my awareness resulted in their taking all our property, including the land and the house, while leaving me to my own devices.

I was only given the insurance money from my parents' deaths, which was enough for me to survive on until I came of age if I lived humbly.

Apparently, my relatives thought that their duty was already fulfilled.

There was no way they could provide a place where I'd belong. I figured that I was better off withering away in the abandoned cobwebs.

Before I knew it, I was left alone. Surprisingly, the impression was the opposite of being locked into a narrow room—I felt as though I had been thrown into a vast area without walls. In this colorless world, I could walk and walk, but the scenery wouldn't change and I would never arrive anywhere.

However, there was one thing that could serve as a guide.

It was a frail and transparent shadow of Aya-oneechan. Having no other place to go, I was happy to follow it.

—Aya-oneechan.

Suddenly, I noticed a big, muddy spider scurrying through the rain. Without much conscious thought, I picked it up and, like my sister had once shown me, let it crawl onto my palm. I clenched my fist.

When I opened my hand again, the big spider was still on my palm. I could not bring myself to squash it. The spider, still alive, crawled off my hand and disappeared somewhere, leaving my hand dirty with mud.

It was at that moment that I strongly felt that—

—I was going to become Aya Otonashi.

When I finally came to, I found myself standing in the pouring rain. I didn't remember how I had gotten there, nor did I remember how much time had passed since the funeral.

I was in an unfamiliar place. My uniform and my skirt were drenched.

The downpour washed away my feelings, left me bereft of warmth, abraded my form, diluted my blood, and melted me into the soil.

How long did I keep walking? Probably not that long, but the aimless trip tore at my soul.

I kept walking—

And by the time my soul had been completely eroded—

—I was surrounded by light.

I couldn't find another way to describe it. There was no sky or ground there and I was naked as the day I was born. I felt my spirit start to disperse into the light. That place did not allow for my individuality to "exist." Every being was equally valuable and equally valueless.

Suddenly, I sensed a soft stream of air that corresponded to my movements. However, I could see no point in controlling the breeze and prepared myself to disappear from this world.

Ah, but wait.

There's something I have to do.

I must "make everyone in the world happy."

Although I was supposed to be empty, there was still a *direction* for me to go in. All at once, the stream of air acquired a direction and started to gather around me.

Light!

Light!

Light was all around me!

Before I knew it, I had left the world of light and found myself in an unfamiliar forest. While listening to the cries of owls and insects, I stood up. However, I didn't know what to do next. I stood there, unable to move. My heart lacked a driving force.

After standing there until the color of the sky changed, I slid my hand into my pocket and took something out.

It was a small gift bag. It contained a bottle of scented oil that I had planned to give my sister for her birthday.

I opened the lid.

A subtle scent of peppermint started to spread around me and I regained enough sensation to feel uncomfortable in my mud-smeared uniform.

Suddenly, I noticed that I was holding a *box*.

It was a beautiful, translucent box shaped like a cube. However, the box looked terribly fragile, as if made of thin glass.

I instinctively knew that this box would grant a *wish*. I had the chance to make any wish come true.

Needless to say, there was only one wish I could make.

I named my box "Bliss."

However, it ended up "flawed."

—Bang, bang!

I wake up to the sound of someone banging on the wall.

"...Hm..."

I rub my eyes. I think I had a nostalgic dream, but I forgot about it the moment I woke up.

The scent of peppermint fills my room; it's the aroma that spurs on my body and heart even though I've long since reached my limit.

"Okay then, time to go."

I stand up so I can continue to seek a new box. Whether or not I will find one, I must fulfill my task of *making everyone in the world happy*, even though I may have forgotten about my past.

That's the only meaning to my life.

I stagger after taking just a few steps. My slimmed-down legs have been carrying me for a long, long time—more than an entire lifetime—but I'm not allowed to stop. There's no reason to, either.

I have devoted my life to others. No one is allowed to stop me.

—Bang, bang!

Ah ... that banging is getting on my nerves.



C h a p t e r

3

C h a p t e

三章

Shortly after seeing Daiya Oomine for the last time at school, I received an e-mail from his address. The message didn't include a single sentence, let alone a greeting, but contained an address located in a distant prefecture that I had nothing to do with.

While I didn't know why Daiya had sent me this e-mail, I knew that there was more to it.

I caught the next train on the Shinkansen line without waiting for the weekend. The address led me to an affluent neighborhood with luxurious buildings, but the house I was looking for was the biggest of them all.

However, the building didn't quite live up to the splendor of the surroundings. The wide garden was not exactly well maintained and left me with a lonely impression.

It didn't take long before I ran into a surprise.

The name plate said "Otonashi."

—*This is where Maria grew up.*

I immediately rang the doorbell, my hands shaking with excitement. A middle-aged woman answered in a listless voice. Without missing a beat, I asked her about Maria, but when she heard Maria's name, her attitude changed at once; she cut our conversation short.

There was no doubt about it. Unlike me, the woman had known Maria before her first encounter with the *boxes*.

In that case, there was no way I'd quit here. After all, I was even willing to sacrifice my friends for Maria. I kept ringing the doorbell until I realized that the woman had no intention of answering. Instead, I climbed over the gate and killed the pedigreed dog that I found on the property. It didn't take the woman long to turn up after she had heard the death cries of her dog, so I showed her the torn insides of her pet.

She realized how much of a lunatic I was and finally answered my questions, weeping in fear. She told me about Maria and her sister, Aya Otonashi.

Apparently, the woman was Maria's aunt. I learned from her about the deplorable accident involving the Otonashis that had left Maria alone in the world. I also found out that none of her relatives knew about Maria's current whereabouts.

It's just as I expected—Maria only has me.

I will find and save her no matter what it takes.

However, my resolve on that day has long since been obscured by the mists of time and does not matter to me anymore. Instead, I will live happily ever after in this false, colorless world, hand in hand with Mogi-san.

Aah—

I would have been so lucky if that were possible.



30,333rd time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

32,875th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

35,890th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

37,227th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

"...Huh?"

I wonder why that is? Even though I'm supposed to be jumping with joy right now, her love doesn't mean a lot to me.

40,301st time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

I also love her, but I've already noticed the truth.

"...Please wait until tomorrow."

I noticed that this is a repeating world and that I have the mission of making *her*, whose name I've forgotten, part of my everyday life. It's my ultimate purpose even if I don't know her name.

Therefore, I cannot answer Mogi-san's feelings no matter how badly I want to.

I run away from the school yard and go to the rooftop. I've come here because I came up with the idea of retaining my memory by jumping off the school building.

It borders on a miracle that I discovered that the same day is repeating. I must not allow this opportunity to slip away. Perhaps I have been repeating this day for over 10,000 times already and just didn't notice.

It's not like I'm unafraid of killing myself—it's downright strange to contemplate suicide—but my will won't bend because of something like this.

I jump into the sky, illuminated by the setting sun.

Splash.

With the sound of my skull splitting open and its contents getting crushed, my consciousness—

40,302nd time

—gets transferred over.

Unable to absorb the shock, I throw up in the classroom.

While getting queer looks from my confused classmates, I dash out of the classroom. I must find clues related to *her*. For some reason, I still remember the places we've been together, even though *her* name eludes me.

I run around all day in search of clues, but I can't find anything.

I may have achieved nothing today, but I must not lose my memory. If I lose my doubts about this world, I might end up repeating the same day thousands upon thousands of times.

Surrounded by red, I jump again and spill the contents of my head.

40,303rd time

I searched the entire school for clues, but I found nothing.
I jump and spill the contents of my head.

43,058th time

"

"

49,178th time

After a long time, I regain my feelings and recall how to speak.

Tears well up. I can't stand it anymore. I can't endure killing myself every day.

"Let's go back ... Let's go back to the enjoyable school festival"

I leave the rooftop behind and return to the school yard where the campfire is set up. Mogi-san approaches me.

I will no longer ignore her confession of love.

"Kasumi Mogi, I love you."

And thus, my long, long fight finally came to an end.

55,555th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

59,876th time

"Please wait until tomorrow."

I noticed that this is a recurring world and that I have the mission of making *her*, whose name I've forgotten, part of my everyday life. It's my ultimate purpose even if I don't know her name.

I take a leap into the dusky sky in order to retain my memory.

65,222nd time

"Let's go back ... Let's go back to the enjoyable school festival"

I will no longer ignore Mogi-san's confession of love.

"Kasumi Mogi, I love you."

And thus, my long, long fight finally came to an end.

66,666th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

70,512nd time

"Please wait until tomorrow."

I take a leap into the dusky sky in order to retain my memory.

78,165th time

"Kasumi Mogi, I love you."

And thus, my long, long fight finally came to an end.

88,888th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

102,538th time

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

"Let's be together forever!"

"Absolutely!"

What could be more wonderful than having such a pretty girlfriend?

I'm the happiest man in the world right now. I want to protect this happiness.

But for some reason I feel that something is wrong. Why is everything so pale? Why do I feel so cramped?

Even though I'm so happy, I feel as if I'm suffocating at the bottom of the ocean.

124,390th time

Let's assume that the world is constantly repeating the day of the school festival. Let's also assume that—just as in the Rejecting Classroom—nobody is able to notice the loop.

In my particular case, there is a certain chance that I would notice anyway. If that happened, I would without a doubt try to somehow get out of the loop, for *her* whose name I've forgotten. I would not even hesitate to kill myself if need be.

But let's add another twist to that hypothesis: there are no clues. Yes, let's assume that there is not a single clue hidden in this world for terminating the recursion. I wouldn't give up so easily, of course, but when there's no clue, then there's ultimately no other choice. Once I were worn out so badly that both my reasoning and my personality are shattered, I would stop retaining my memory and start looking for someone that could serve as my haven, in order to protect my mind from a complete breakdown.

I would choose to be together with Mogi-san.

However, that would not resolve anything.

After all, this hypothetical world keeps repeating, so I would eventually become aware of its nature again. If that happened, I would once again try to get out, fail, and give up. By the end of the struggle, I would have forgotten that I chose Mogi-san and choose her again.

The loop would repeat itself. Over and over.

It's an endless hell by any definition. In the stupid belief that there's some hope, I would keep jumping into the bloody red pool, suffer and eventually forget about the entire struggle, only to start over again, looking for hope and jumping into the pool of blood. I would keep repeating this foolish cycle with no chance of escaping.

There would be no end. Neither a bad one nor a good one.

Now let's assume that I were really in that world.

"I love you, Kazu-kun," Mogi-san says, lit by the campfire.

I love her too. And yet, her words leave me completely cold.

"Kazu-kun?" she asks, seeing me hang my head.

I run off. Ignoring her cries, I rush into the school building and head to the stairway. *To the roof*, I think for a moment, but I shake that idea off. Why am I so hell-bent on jumping to my death? It's almost as if I've acquired the habit of doing so!

If I follow my habits, I won't be able to get out of here.

I turn around and enter the home economics classroom instead.

While breathing wildly, I lean onto the kitchen counter and gaze at the campfire outside the window. As I watch the students dance, I make an observation.

—The resolution is way too low.

The pixels stand out like a mosaic and give away how false this world is. No ... I'm being silly. This is the real world. It must have looked like this all along. I just didn't notice, that's all. That *has* to be it or I'm fucked.

It's just a hypothesis, just a silly hypothesis. I wasn't talking about anything real. A horrible loop like that mustn't exist!

It's all just a delusion made up by my insane mind.

However, there is one truth that I cannot escape from:

—I want to die.

I pull open a drawer and take out a kitchen knife. With a surprising lack of hesitation, I stab myself in the heart.

I could clearly feel how my heart was squashed like a huge caterpillar. My blood was spurting like crazy, too.

I was supposed to find eternal rest.

124,391st time

But my memory was carried over. I've leapt through space and time and find myself in our classroom right before the start of the school festival.

My lack of surprise confirms that I've been repeating the same day over and over.

I make a beeline for the home economics room, take out the kitchen knife and stab it deep into my heart.

124,392nd time

But my memory was retained. Even though I want to die, the more often I die, the more strongly I realize that I'm trapped in a meaningless loop.

It seems like I can't kill myself by stabbing myself in the heart. Maybe because it takes some time to bleed to death? Maybe it has to be an instantaneous death?

I stagger out of the classroom and walk to the nearest bypass road. After waiting for a large truck, I jump into the street and get hit.

124,393rd time

But my memory was retained and I am still alive. I have returned to the classroom. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" I yell without meaning to and get strange looks from my classmates. Who cares.

I go to the train station and position myself at the end of the platform. As a train comes in, I take a leap into its path.

My body is torn to shreds.

124,394th time

But my memory was retained and I returned to the classroom. I'm perfectly fine even though I died almost immediately. I'm still alive.

It would seem like there is no way out of this loop.

I start to wail at the top of my lungs, getting on my back and flapping my arms and legs like a little child. My classmates give me queer looks but I don't give a shit. They'll forget anyway.

After having a good cry, I calm down a bit, but of course it's too early to give up on dying. I get back on my feet, rush into the restroom, and sit down on a toilet seat. I then start googling for various suicide methods on my cellphone. I'll try each one of them; one of them might work. My heartbeat finally starts to calm down; my only cold comfort can be found in thinking about dying.

I'll go for electrocution this time.

I climb onto a power pole and grab the three electric wires with my wet hands.

124,395th time

But I couldn't die. Well, nothing to worry myself about. There are still plenty of methods left.

I'll try hanging myself this time.

124,396th time

Drowning in the sea it is.

124,423rd time

Death by being run over, death by falling, death by electrocution, death by hanging, death by being crushed, death by drowning, death by exsanguination, death by suffocation, death by hypothermia, death by heat, death by explosion—I tried them all, but nothing resulted in a permanent death.

I end up giving up even on dying ... giving up? Haha, so I gave up once more?

A laugh escapes my lips. I gave up. How many times is that now? How many thousand times is it? How many times have I come to do the same thing in this world where my will amounts to nothing?

In a fit of pique, I scratch my head until it starts to bleed. Of course, that won't solve anything.

I'm at a dead end. I can't do anything. If I give up dying and forget about the loop, I will eventually try once more to find fragments of *her* whose name I forgot. And then I will give up and choose to live in this world together with Mogi-san. And then I will forget everything about this long struggle until I get suspicious once more, only to despair again and resort to suicide because I'll have forgotten that I can't die.

This is ridiculous. What kind of hell is this? Tell me, how could anything be worse than this!

Neither the faint hope I keep embracing again and again, nor the deep despair that keeps sneaking up to me, have any meaning in this hell. It's all the same. I am forced to keep wandering in an endless sandstorm; there's only sand around me, and if I open my thirsty mouth, I get a mouthful of sand that makes me cough like crazy.

What did I do? Why do I have to suffer so horribly?!

"Someone ... someone answer me!" I scream, but no one replies. I run out of the classroom. My feet automatically take me to the place they are most accustomed to—the rooftop. I open the door and the color of the sky leaps out at me.

For a moment I'm thunderstruck, but then I start laughing at myself.

"Ha, ha..."

Even though it's still morning, the sky is stained red. It's not crimson, but an ominous, deep red that looks like blood.

Apparently, I've been nuts all along. I can't even correctly register the world anymore. The blue sky looks red to me.

I can't stop laughing. While laughing at the top of my lungs, I approach the fence. I don't even care what happens anymore. Duh, maybe I should kill myself for the time being? I look at the ground and see a mountain of corpses. I don't get it. This doesn't make any sense. I must be hallucinating. Under the corpses is a dark red, mud-like pool of blood. The dead bodies have a variety of expressions on their faces, but most of them are distorted with agony.

And all of them have my face.

"—Haha!"

Aah, yeah, those are my own lives that I wasted. Pointless deaths.

I stop laughing and tear up instead. What should I do? This sight is violence against the eyes. It's like being stabbed in the eyes.

This sight makes me realize how horribly this world has treated me; how many times I've died. But I won't be released. My actions won't bear fruit. I'm completely adrift.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!" I scream, even though my cry won't reach anyone.

"Do not fret. You should be proud of yourself!"

There's an answer, but despite the absurdity of this occurrence, I am not the least bit surprised. I've already been seeing things, so it's only natural to also start hearing things.

"What you're seeing is proof of your struggle against this world."

He has made himself comfortable on the mountain of corpses, crossing his legs, and is gently smiling up at me.

He has my own face, that of Kazuki Hoshino.

I couldn't care less if my hallucinations resemble me or not, but what pisses me off is how mellow he looks. It makes him resemble my enemy.

Therefore I can't help addressing him in a rough tone.

"I struggled, yeah, but what of it? There was no point in dying and keeping my memory! Nor will there ever be!"

"Nothing was futile," my other "self" counters.

"What was that?"

"You only need to open your eyes, and you'll see that your struggle wasn't futile."

"What is it that I'm supposed to see, eh?!"

"The change that you caused!"

Change? The only thing that changed is that I went bonkers; and maybe that I fell in love with Mogi-san. But so what? None of that is actually relevant.

That's not quite correct, "I" say. "Just look how red the sky is!"

"..."

The sky's red indeed. But what of it?

I return my gaze to "myself" to see what "I" am talking about. "I" am sitting there with a creepy smile on "my" face, the only being drawn in full color atop a mountain of corpses that look like cheap sketches. I notice a scar on "my" right hand.

A scar...? What was the meaning of that scar, again? What kind of resolve did it symbolize...?

"Do you know what has been giving you a hard time? It's your attachment to a world where everyone is happy! You couldn't bring yourself to abandon this world because you enjoyed being in love with Kasumi Mogi! Without that sentiment, there wouldn't have been a need for so many corpses."

There wouldn't have been a *need* for corpses?

"...Do you claim that there is a point to piling up all these bodies?"

"I do! Just think about it: Dead bodies have no place in a 'happy world,' do they? They conflict with the notion of happiness, don't they? This mountain of corpses represents a revolt against the charade! Do you seriously believe that they had no effect whatsoever?"

"It's meaningless! It was all meaningless! I even forgot *her* na—"

"Stop pretending!" "I" shout with a sudden change of tone. *"Stop pretending that you forgot her name."*

"I" scowl coldly at me.

"Don't run away. Don't seek refuge in false happiness. Confront reality. Face up to this world. You lack the resolve, the dedication to devote your body and soul to her. Your subconscious knows what you have to do and what consequences your actions will have. You kept yourself back because you know that even greater despair awaits down the road."

"W-What you are you talking—"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Even though you claimed to do everything for her, you could not bring yourself to pass the point of no return. You could not abandon your humanity. You fled from the final decision under the pretext that you had no scar on your right hand."

"I" focus on me.

"Are you unable to save her without the Empty Box? Are you so weak?"

"...But ... I don't know what to do..."

"Shout her name and you will know what to do!"

I breathe in and frantically shake my head.

"B-But I forgot *her* name! I don't even remember what kind of person she was..."

"No, you haven't forgotten her. There is no way that you of all people could forget her! After all, you are her 'savior!'"

"My" face returns to a gentle smile.

"Now let's finish off this world."

With these words, "I" disappear along with the mountain of bodies.

"——"

My conversation with "myself" was just a hallucination—a delusion in my head. However, the counterpart to delusions, *reality*, does not exist here. There's no spine or anything certain in this world; it's as thin as paper and can easily be torn.

Even delusions can penetrate and overthrow this world.

I will therefore follow "my" advice and face up to the situation.

"...Ah, I see!"

I thought I was hallucinating when the sky looked red to me, but that's wrong. Now that I think about it, that's wrong!

The sky had permanently turned red long ago, which implies:

I was indeed inflicting damage on this world.

I have come to retain my memory by killing myself over and over; doing so was against the supposedly happy cycle. As a result, I slowly but surely damaged this realm, much like digging a tunnel out of a prison cell. I may have given in to the sweet temptation of a fake everyday life countless

times, but in the end, that didn't stop me from resisting the world. I never ultimately strayed from my way.

I extend my arms toward the red sky and start to spin around.

—Look at this! It was me who created this bloody sky!

Very well, I'll do as "I" told myself.

"...I'll finish this world off."

The countless recurrences weren't for naught. The feeling of progress strengthens my resolve.

Aah ... I'm so excited. I'm so excited that I feel a throbbing pain beneath my eyes.

I leave the rooftop and rush down the stairs. Before I return to my classroom, I drop by the home economics room to fetch something. The people who pass by are all low-resolution and blurred. Geez, why didn't their fuzziness catch my eye up until now?

In the classroom I find a girl in a wheelchair: Kasumi Mogi.

Unlike the obscured people around her, she's colored brightly.

"Mogi-san!"

She seems to be taken aback after witnessing me call her name with eyes wide open and ablaze with excitement. I am clearly behaving abnormally.

But I couldn't care less.

I take Mogi-san's hands and ask her, "What do you think is love?"

Completely puzzled by my strange behavior, she is only able to incline her head. I keep my tight grip on her hands and look her deep in the eyes.

"O-Ouch ... what's wrong, Kazuki-kun?"

"Answer me. Quick."

"Um ... love?" she answers reluctantly. "If you ... like someone a lot, I suppose? And care for each other, maybe?"

I shake my head.

"No, that's not enough! I believe that love is much deeper than that. It's much more irreversible. It exceeds just caring for each other and continues until both parties become entangled and inseparable. They combine to form a single concept. They become one. Neither of them must come apart. THAT'S LOVE, I believe," I rocket about. "Yes. That's why the fragment of her that I was looking for is right here."

I point at my chest.

"I couldn't find a fragment anywhere in this world. I thought there was no such thing. Haha ... I'm such a fool, no? The fragment's right here! I only needed to dissect myself!"

"What...? You're not making any sense ... you're frightening me...!"

"But sadly that's not enough. That's not enough to reach her. I have to create an environment where I can fully focus on sensing her. What do you think I should do? Hm?"

"...Let go of me!" she cries and shakes off my hands.

Am I shocked? Yeah, I'm shocked. After all, I love Mogi-san. Well, whatever. Nobody understands me. After all, I'm the defier of this world.

"If she's inside me and I want to listen more closely to her, then there's a simple solution—"

I take out the kitchen knife I was hiding under my clothes.

"—I simply have to make sure that I'm alone."

"...Huh? Ah...!"

I stab Mogi-san in the chest.

How do you erase people from this world?

Mogi-san once accomplished this feat in the Rejecting Classroom by simply killing her targets, so I'm testing the same method on her now.

When I pull out the knife from her chest, blood starts to spout out from the wound. As the blood spurts at my face, my conscience starts to torment me with remorse. I killed the girl I genuinely loved. I killed an innocent girl who had maintained a positive view on life despite getting in an accident that left her handicapped. If I recalled just a fraction of our happy memories together, I would no doubt be overwhelmed with pangs of guilt and my mind would collapse.

But I'm insane. As such, I'm able to scrap my morals and put a lid on those memories.

As a panic breaks out in the classroom, I chant with a soft voice:

"Love."

"Love."

"Love."

Don't give up thinking. Don't falter. Maintain your resolve. Dispose of your conscience. Give up your future. Don't go the wrong way. Just walk straight ahead. For love. For love. Slaughter them all for love.

And I scream.

I scream the name of the girl waiting for me at the end of my path.

"Maria!"

Right, that's her name—

Maria.

Maria Otonashi.

I've chosen *her*. I've chosen Maria.

Therefore...

"Disappear, Kasumi Mogi!" I shout and pierce her chest again with the kitchen knife.

...Come to think of it, Mogi-san once tried to kill me in a similar way back in the Rejecting Classroom, but in the end, she didn't do it. She was unable to cross the last line and kill the boy she loved. She maintained her humanity.

But I crossed that line.

Farewell, humanity. Farewell, Kazuki Hoshino.

Suddenly, my right shoulder is hit by a hard blow. I drop my knife and fall over. As I look up to check what happened, I see Haruaki standing there with widened eyes. Apparently, he body-slammed me.

"What the ... what the ... what have you done, Hoshii?!"

Haruaki is trying to nurse Mogi-san, but it's futile. As the one who stabbed her, I can tell that she's beyond saving.

I killed Kasumi Mogi without fail.

However, it doesn't end here. Mogi-san may have been the person who tied me to this place the most, but the others also have that power. Haruaki is particularly dangerous.

Should I stab him? I ask myself, but killing him right now is difficult, considering his strong build and the fact that he's alarmed.

Haruaki and the others will blame me if I stay here; his words may take away my resolve. It's entirely possible that their protest might move me to abort the slaughter.

I should withdraw. I should escape before I regain my conscience.

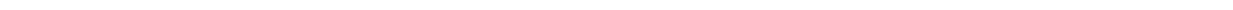
So, I cut my throat.

Screams all around me. I collapse. I smile as I trace my own blood with my fingers.

—Madder, Kazuki! Go madder!

Go mad and reject everyone except for yourself!

Get rid of everything else, so that you can focus on Maria who has melted into you!



124,424th time

—Maria.

The moment I yell her name, my mind starts spinning like mad. My brain gets shaken around so hard that I feel like breaking. You should be a bit more careful with your host!

However, the memory that gets projected after the pain is a blissful one. It starts to play like a video, outlined by a shimmer of light.

It's a trivial memory of an ordinary day.

I believe it was during the rainy season. I was in Maria's peppermint-scented room.

With a worried look on my face, I was clumsily preparing a bowl of noodles in the kitchen.

"Kazuki."

Her voice was not strong and self-confident as usual, but weak. Ah ... right. Maria is the only one who calls me by my name. Only she has the privilege of calling me that.

In order to answer her call, I left the kitchen without putting down my chopsticks. Maria was lying in her three-quarter bed and gazing at me, using her blanket to cover everything except for her flushed face. An ice pack rested on her forehead. I suppose it's wrong to say this—after all, she was suffering from a high fever—but she looked cuter than ever before.

"What's the matter, Maria?"

She coughed and gave me a satisfied smile.

"...fufu, it's nothing..."

"Huh?" I was surprised that she would go out of her way to call me over for no reason.

"I said it's nothing. I just wanted to see your face... *cough! cough!*"

She did not say anything else. Apparently, she really had no other reason for calling me over.

I returned to the kitchen, scratching my head. After I finished preparing the noodles, I placed the bowl on the living room table.

Maria stood up and somehow staggered over to the seat cushion, despite seeming very groggy. For some reason, however, she did not pick up her chopsticks and just kept scowling at the bowl.

"...What's wrong?"

"I'm just thinking that it looks real hot. Too hot to blow on and eat, even."

"Ah, I see. Eat at your own pace!" I suggested. "...Huh? Why do you look so sour?"

"Boy are you slow. Aren't you enough of a man to *cough! cough!* ...offer to blow on my noodles for me?"

"Urm..."

She's saying such bold things in such a weak voice. So basically, she wants me to blow on her noodles and feed them to her?

"Wait!"

Isn't that embarrassing as hell...? Isn't that a privilege of couples that are, well, all lovey-dovey...?

"Hurry up."

"...But, you know ... that's embarra—"

"Hurry up, I said."

She was probably going to keep scowling at me until I obeyed. I gave in and did as she asked.

I grabbed a few noodles with my chopsticks, blew on them, and moved them over to Maria's mouth. However, she refused to eat them.

"...Err, what's wrong?"

She smirked at me in silence.

"You wouldn't want me to say 'Aaah', would you...?" I asked hesitantly.

"Looks like you got it this time. Hurry up."

"...Ah ... aaah."

"Louder."

Oh, screw it!

"AAAAAAH!" I said and held out my chopsticks, turning even redder than Maria had because of her fever.

At last, she opened her mouth and showed me her defenseless, red tongue.

I have to admit that seeing her like that rattled me a bit.

"Mm." She slurped the noodles and said with a happy and contented smile:
"Could use some flavoring."

God, you're picky!

"Also, I'll eat the rest myself because it's too much of a hassle to do otherwise."

What was she asking for just a few moments ago?!

However, Maria's torture was just beginning. After she finished up her noodles, she started undressing. Suddenly. Without warning.

Of course, she wasn't wearing anything under her pajamas except for her underwear.

"W-What are you doing?!" I yelled out, desperately averting my eyes.

"My pajamas are all sweaty because I haven't changed my clothes all day. Plus, I just ate something hot. Oh, it feels so disgusting."

"That's no reason to undress in front of me! Did your fever make you an exhibitionist, Maria?!"

"Well, I would take a shower if I could, but what if I collapsed as a result? Besides, showers aren't good for your body when you're ill. So, Kazuki, would you wipe my body with a wet towel?"

"...Y-You're kidding, right?! Just look at you! You're in your freaking underwear! You should be embarrassed! I mean, you're still technically a girl, *and* younger than me on top of that!"

"Who cares. Get on with it." she said.

Not only had she become picky, she had also turned into a pervert.

"What, er, what if I got aroused by your naked skin and threw myself at you?"

"It doesn't matter because I'm only half conscious and would forget about it anyway. That wouldn't even count."

Now that sounds even more perverted!

"...Hah..."

With a deep sigh, I gave up on bringing her to her senses. There was no way someone like Maria would take back her words. Besides, she probably was really feeling uncomfortable because of her sweat. Probably.

I filled a wash bowl with hot water, moistened a towel, wrung it out and pressed it against Maria's slender back.

I held my breath.

How else should I have reacted? I could see her white bra despite my repeated attempts to look away.

Ugh ... I think I'm gonna lose control.

"Gonna lose control?"

"Of course not!" I retorted.

But I wouldn't attack her even if I did lose control. I don't want to assault Maria because of my transient sexual impulses. Maria was only teasing me because she was well aware of that.

Dammit ... she has me in the palm of her hand, doesn't she? Geez...

This is a mannequin, I started telling myself. This is just a mannequin!

After I had somehow managed to finish wiping her back without losing it, I moved on to the rest of her body. I wrung out the towel again and started wiping her arms.

Maria's slender body did not display a girlish softness. Her ribs were quite visible, too. I could tell that her body was still developing.

"Ugh..."

I had reminded myself that she wasn't a mannequin. My hands stopped moving.

"What's wrong? Hurry up."

Maria had a broad grin on her face. She was clearly enjoying herself.

Just to make this clear: I also want to touch you! I'm also enjoying it! We're totally equal!

While bolstering myself with lies, I finished wiping her body. My throbbing heart had left me completely exhausted, so I had to lie down and catch my breath.

However, Maria's torture continued.

"Kazuki, I'm cold!"

"Huh?"

Maria pretended to shiver, and her next instruction left me terrified:

"Warm me up."

And so it came to be that we ended up sleeping in the same bed, Maria wearing just a t-shirt over her underwear.

Her long hair was pressed against my nose. I could clearly feel her back and her legs against my body.

It's okay now, right? I'm allowed to attack her, right? This is obviously a sign that's she's giving me the OK! ...But yeah, I know! I don't have the balls to throw myself at her!

Because we were lying back-to-back, I couldn't see her face—but I was sure that she was smirking contentedly.

However, for some reason, Maria didn't say anything to tease me. All I could hear was her breathing. Beyond silently squeezing my hand, she did nothing else.

The moment I asked myself, *did she fall asleep?*... she finally spoke up in a quiet voice

"This brings back memories..." She moved her head slightly. "Whenever my body fails me like this, I recall the penetrating smell of my old school infirmary. I used to have weak lungs and had trouble fitting in with my classmates, so I would often go straight to the infirmary after getting to school. Back then, my sister was all I—"

She stopped speaking.

"Maria...?"

Maria never talked about her past; because of the Flawed Bliss, she couldn't remember anything to start with.

"...My befuddled mind has made up some silly things ... forget what I said."

I didn't ask any questions. Even if I did, she would not have answered them.

"I'm sorry, Kazuki," she muttered with her back still turned to me. "I don't want to give you my cold. I'm sorry."

You say that now? I thought for a moment, but figured that she must have been worried all along, and just couldn't bring herself to say anything out loud before.

"Don't worry about it. I don't mind in the least. With such a bad fever, you would have needed someone to look after you anyway, and I wouldn't want to leave that role to anyone else."

"I know you mean it and that troubles me," she says. "You're so gentle that it troubles me. It really does."

"...So it doesn't actually trouble you, does it?"

"It does. I mustn't be so dependent on someone else ... I have to be alone ... and yet, I want to be with you for..."

Her words faded away.

"Maria?"

I could hear her breathing calmly. At first I thought she was pretending to be asleep, but then I noticed that she was really sleeping.

She did not usually expose her weaknesses so openly. The fever must have made her a bit delirious.

"...I will stay with you even if you're troubled, Maria. I'll be with you even if worse things happen to me than catching your cold. I would do anything to stay with you. I would give up anything."

As I embraced her fragile body, I said, "Let's stay together for all eternity."

I wasn't trying to confess or say anything special. Those words just naturally escaped my lips.

I knew for a fact that we were connected by the strongest of bonds and were already living as one.

Maria was the one who still believed that it wasn't too late for us to be separated again.

"Even if you disappear into a different world, Maria," I whispered and gently stroked her hair, "I will definitely find you."

That memory was really just an ordinary moment of our everyday life, but that everyday life we spent together is full of reasons for me to stand up.

I have a motivation that is strong enough to make me build a mountain of corpses.

I always said that I'm Maria's knight. I always said that I would destroy anything between us and kill anyone hindering me, and that I would climb over the rubble and the corpses to come to her rescue.

I'm simply getting ready to act. That's all.



Let's leave my flashback and return to the false reality that is holding me captive.

I am in the corridor, frozen where I stand.

"Let's stay together for all eternity," I remind myself as I drop my gaze.

Haruaki's corpse lies before me.

My head starts to spin when I realize that. I feel as if someone beat me with a baseball bat.

My hands and knife are slimy with blood. It drips down between my fingers. All the sounds around me echo in my head.

Ah, I see, I was escaping from reality. I couldn't swallow the fact that I killed Haruaki and instead indulged in some reminiscing.

Using my memories with Maria like this is a good idea. They will allow me to maintain my sanity.

If I don't make use of them, I won't be able to endure what I'm going to do.

I won't hesitate to fight. I'll stain the lovely ornaments of this festival with blood. I'll change their smiles to screams by slaughtering them. I'll destroy everything.

"What's wrong, Kazu?" Daiya asks as he runs up to me. "What the...? What did you do to Haru...?"

He wrinkles his brow and clenches his fists. His expression shows that he can't comprehend the situation, even though what happened is obvious.

"...Daiya."

In the real world, Daiya made an irrevocable mistake and disappeared before me. Here, on the other hand, he has come to terms with his past and is Kokone's lover. He does not know that boxes exist.

We could stay best friends here—a very appealing thought.

Therefore...

"I have to kill you as well."

Daiya is a hindrance that ties me to this world.

"...What the ... what the hell are you doing...?"

"Just one more thing, Daiya," I ask. "Do you know a Kasumi Mogi?"

"Cut out that crap! Who the fuck is Kazumi Mogee?!"

Okay, Mogi-san has ceased to exist in this world. She has disappeared from the memory of the inhabitants. That means that murdering her in the previous world was successful.

Haruaki won't exist in the next world, either.

Once all the people I love have disappeared from this world, there will be nothing left to tempt me.

I'll kill Daiya with the kitchen knife while he's still in disbelief. If I fail, I can simply commit suicide.

And yet—

"—Ah..."

That knife falls to the floor with a clank. It slipped out of my grip.

"UH, AAAAAaaaaah..."

Instead I tear up and start to cry against my will.

That's right. It's excruciating. It's just too excruciating. I may have killed myself thousands of times, but murder is on a entirely different level. I've forgotten what the real world looks like, so murder in this fake world feels completely genuine; I can't persuade myself that this isn't real. As a matter of fact, the people I kill disappear for good. The act is irrevocable. No. It's agonizing. I don't want to. This is just like killing myself in a roundabout way. My heart will disappear. I will disappear.

"Uh ... gh—"

But that's fine. It *has* to be that way. After all, if I fade away, the Maria inside me will become visible. By the time that happens, I might not be myself anymore, but I will be able to meet her. I guess I will be broken—No, perhaps I am already broken? Is it too late already?

It doesn't matter.

I'll just put my body in motion by chanting that spell.

Love. Love. Love. Love. —Love.

The commotion around me intensifies as I stand beside Daiya's body, just as motionless as he is. Right now, the students are too frightened of me to intervene, but they will pin me down eventually.

I manage to get a grip and head to the stairway, pushing through the crowd. The students are still hesitating, so I rush up to the roof. At last, I start hearing the footsteps of people pursuing me.

Without further ado I jump from the roof and die.



124,425th time

I call Kokone out to the roof and kill her.

I then run away from school before anyone notices and start to consider my options.

Killing people one by one is very limiting. I need a tool that allows me to kill more efficiently. I could imitate the incidents that occasionally occur in the US and fire a machine gun everywhere. Since I can ignore my own survival, I could tie on a belt of dynamite and blow myself up like some terrorist, maybe? ...No, that's not realistic. It's not that easy to get my hands on a machine gun or explosives. Of course, I wouldn't mind breaking the law and killing someone to obtain them, but it's still too difficult. It might be possible to obtain some heavy weapons over the course of a few days, but in my case, where everything gets reset after one day, it's not feasible. Maybe I should break into an American military base and steal some weapons? ...that's not realistic even though I don't care if I die. Then how about poison? I could look for some wolfsbane and brew a poison from it. Alternatively, I could try to obtain some potassium cyanide. Sounds more feasible, I guess? Shouldn't be impossible, at least.

...Man, it's surprisingly hard to engage in mass murder.

For now, I get some gasoline from a gas station and walk around the school spilling it everywhere. Because of the stench, the teachers notice me surprisingly quickly. While I manage to set a fire, the effects prove disappointing.

I survived even though I was near the center of the explosion. In the end, I had to cut my throat.

124,426th time

Apparently, nobody died from the fire I had started in the previous world. The school festival is being held like usual. I try to put my mass poisoning plan into action, but I can't get my hands on poison fast enough.

I decide to postpone the poisoning. Instead, I break into a truck that was parked by the convenience store and kill the driver with a hammer. I planned to drive to school and run over some students, but since I don't even have a license, I end up crashing the truck at an intersection.

The accident isn't fatal, but my right leg is crushed. Since I can't go on killing while crippled, I cut my throat.

124,427th time

I get my hands on some poison. During the class closing ceremony party held after the campfire, I poison everyone's tea. After making sure that everyone was squirming in pain, I go to the rooftop and jump to my death.

124,428th time

A surprisingly large number of people survived the poisoning, even though the dose was far higher than lethal; only three people disappeared. In that case, there's hardly any point in running around all day in search for poison. I'll try it one more time, but if the effects continue to disappoint, I should probably come up with a different method.

124,429th time

My mind collapses in a sudden fit of reason and I kill myself before doing anything else of note.

124,435th time

After a few more suicides, I finally recover enough willpower to kill. I should stop using poison. Killing people one by one with a knife is more efficient.

124,444th time

I killed all my classmates, but nothing happens. The school festival is still being held, although our classroom is now empty.

It seems that this world is different from the Rejecting Classroom, where only one classroom was involved. Killing all my classmates is not sufficient.

How can I end this world? By killing the entire population? How should I do that when I already have such trouble just killing my classmates?

Confronted with the despair of an endless task, I lose my mind again and kill myself.

124,445th time

One suicide was enough to calm back down. Well, my mind has clearly taken damage, but at least I'm still able to think.

My only solace lies in the fact that the crack in the red sky is growing, slowly but surely. I'm successfully denying this "world of happiness."

My next goal for the time being is the extinction of all the people in my school.

I decide to steal a truck again. This time I don't lose control and manage to run over a few students who had been enjoying the campfire. I die when I crash into the school building at 100kmph.

124,446th time

However, only three people died in the accident. I never realized that it's so hard to kill people efficiently. This really makes me appreciate weapons that were developed for exactly that purpose.

For the sake of efficiency, I decide to assemble everyone in a single place. I only have to take a few students hostage and kill one of them, and the students start to obey my orders. I have them tie themselves up with ropes and kill those who didn't tie themselves up tightly enough. Once everyone is tied up, I pour gasoline everywhere and set a fire. I can't escape the gym in time, though, and burn to death.

124,447th time

Unsurprisingly, the number of people in my school has shrunk by more than a half. I can't withstand the pangs of my conscience, however, and I lose my mind and kill myself.

124,480th time

Lately, I've been losing my mind and becoming incapable of thought more frequently. There were days when I couldn't bring myself to move, but whenever I could, I made sure to kill at least one student.

And I finally manage to rid the school of people.

However, nothing happens. The school festival is no longer being held, of course, but there are still swarms of people in town.

Do I have to kill them as well? Do I have to kill innocent people and suffer even more?

Facing despair, I jump to my death once more. Splash.

124,481st time

I kill Luu-chan and the rest of my family. I can't stop vomiting.

124,491th time

I try to hijack an airplane in order to crash it into a high-rise, but I can't even get onto a plane. I commit suicide by biting off my tongue.

124,502nd time

I hijack a full train full of people and derail it. It's my greatest success so far.
I'm totally going to repeat this a few times.



124,609th time

I suspend my mass murder activities for an iteration and lie on my back on the rooftop at school.

The number of people isn't shrinking. There's still lots of them even though I killed so many. I don't feel like I'm making any progress.

I realized something after killing so many people: Mankind is tougher than I expected. Cockroaches don't hold a candle to mankind. Catastrophes may wipe away entire countries, epidemics may kill thousands of people, the planet may become uninhabitable, aliens may attack from outer space, the sun may go supernova; as a result, mankind may be decimated but people will survive no matter what. And the survivors will continue to breed. You can't eradicate them. That's how I feel as someone tasked with endlessly killing people.

The "value of life" is a much-discussed topic, but I instinctively found an answer to this never-ending discussion. Life has no weight in itself; it's a concept created by the observer that does not have a definite form. I didn't just come up with this theory because I wanted to justify my deeds. Essentially, life does not entail multiple instances but is just one massive wobbly lump. However, we tend to refer to the bodies that were formed out of that giant lump as "lives". The essence of life is in all of us and can't be "stolen" or "born." As long as the essence of life exists, life does not decrease or increase, and it certainly won't disappear.

I don't need anyone to believe me. The way I view humans is no longer that of a peer. I can't consider myself human anymore.

While I've long since despaired, the awareness that I have degenerated into a non-human paints me even blacker, distorts me even worse and leaves me even emptier. Should my equilibrium lean over just a bit toward the side of despair, I would break once and for all. I would keep killing myself.

But I won't stop now. After all, my activities have borne fruit.

The red sky has become riddled with cracks. I can virtually hear the crackling.

I am indeed destroying this world bit by bit, but at the same time, I can't distinguish the cracks in the crimson sky from my hallucinations.

There is a mountain of corpses in the school yard, consisting of the people I've killed. My beloved ones are also among the people that I see due to that hallucination, but I can't remember their names. I can't view humans as humans anymore. I can't tell the masses of flesh apart. I'm shit. I'm a steaming pile of shit.

Splash.

—Oh? When did I jump down? Geez, it's become a bad habit of mine.

However, I don't die instantaneously. With my head split half-open, I crawl around. Would be nice if I found some hope lying around somewhere, but of course there is no such thing, and even if there were, I wouldn't be able to pick it up.

I lose blood like crazy and—here it goes—I'm dead again.

124,611st time

After I finish slurping down a bowl of noodles in Ikebukuro, I take a chainsaw out of my overnight bag and start cutting down the people in the restaurant. Once I'm done, I leave the establishment and start slaughtering the people on the streets. It's a living hell, but it also appears so distant to me that I don't even feel involved. Just when I cut apart someone dressed as a maid advertising a product, my chainsaw conks out. The stunned crowd notices that the chainsaw has stopped making noises. Most likely, I'll be lynched by the brave people of Ikebukuro at any moment. I should kill myself before that happens. But for some reason I can't find my knife. I'm drenched in so much blood that I can't see anything. Thinking back, the broth for those noodles was quite something.

Someone claps me on the shoulder.

Who is it? There is nobody who could be doing that. Nobody has dared to approach my blood-drenched figure.

But it's an undeniable fact that someone's clapping me on my shoulder. I turn around, but there is no one to be found. I see no one. In other words, someone that I cannot see is clapping me on the shoulder. Okay, there's no doubt about it: he must be a monster. A monster that can easily kill me anytime.

But for some reason I know him, even though he's invisible.

Who is it? Who is who is who is it?

—Well, of course.

—It's me.

My vision turns black.

The invisible monster invades my body with a sharp pain that feels like having my eyes pierced by a shard of glass. A sense of shame wells up. I traverse the universe. I travel among the stars. A peculiar red noise disturbs my brain waves. There is no sound. There has been no sound for ages. A sea of toxic insects. The circulating poison makes me rave. Paralyzed, I suddenly find myself amidst countless TV monitors. The monitors form a gapless maze and show me killing people. Stop it! I don't want to see that! Don't showcase my sins in such a passionless way! My cries are ignored. I'm shown more near-endless sins. I am crushed under the weight of my sin.

The contents of my mind burst out of my body and are destroyed. My flesh bursts. It bursts like caramel popcorn.

I suddenly realize:

This is the end. This is my end.

Will I be able to meet her, then?

Will I meet Maria?

I open the curtain of this blackened world. I open another curtain. And another curtain. Whenever I open one, this shabby room grows darker and darker. Surrounded by the dark, I keep committing suicide. I get killed by delusions that I can't recognize as delusions.

But the stars continue to revolve, and so does my field of vision.

Where am I?

This time I'm falling down a bottomless hole. I keep falling. Oh, how deep is this hole? Who dug it? The hole is so deep that I could bury all the corpses I created. No matter how long I keep falling, I never reach the bottom. I can't. I can't.

But after an infinite amount of time, I finally arrive.

My body has been accelerating throughout the long fall. It smashes against the bare ground and bursts once more.

Splash.

It turns into shreds of flesh.

But before I know it, I am revived and start falling again. After an infinite amount of time, I reach the bottom and burst into shreds.

The loop keeps repeating.

Splash. Splash.

Splash. Splash. Splash. Splash. Splash.

As that sound keeps playing in my brain, I wake up.

"Ah."

I am standing in the middle of one of Japan's busiest areas, Ikebukuro, drenched in blood and holding a broken chainsaw.

However, now that I've returned, there is no air around me anymore. Well, I can breathe, but something crucial is lacking. Something is missing.

Ah, I see!

There are no people.

All I hear is silence. The absence of what should be here has turned the town into ruins.

As I'm assaulted by a strong impulse that seems to blaze through my chest, I let out an agonizing cry. I did something I can't undo! I did something I can't undo! The taste of despair spreads on my tongue; a taste much like green saliva. Unable to endure this, I run around the silent town. The normally bustling main street is empty. The town has been abandoned—left all alone. This is so fucked up. It would be so much easier to swallow if everything around me simply disappeared and turned black.

I run around until I'm exhausted and can't walk anymore. I lean against a deserted car that is stopped in the middle of a 5-way intersection.

"Hah ... Hah ... Hah..."

As I pant away, the deserted town charges at me. It jumps into my eyes and tells me:

All the people have disappeared.

"—Ha. Haha."

I did it.

I made it to the end of the world.

I certainly haven't finished killing every person on the planet, but my continuous murder has prevented me from becoming happy. That effectively renders the power of the Flawed Bliss, which is to create a "world of happiness," impotent.

I finally succeeded in making the Flawed Bliss fail on me.

"I did it ... I did it...!"

Thanks to this achievement—

I can't even indulge in false happiness anymore.

Not even a box can save me from all-encompassing despair anymore.

"AAAH—!"

I could almost throw up with delight. As I happily despair, I get the urge to dance and squash my eyeballs. I spread my overflowing tears and snot all over my face. Before I know it, I'm beating my own legs swollen.

I'm all alone in this world.

124,612nd time

Even though I accomplished my goal, I remain unable to meet Maria. I wake up in my classroom during the preparations for the school festival.

Of course, the classroom is empty. Ever since Kokone disappeared, I'm not holding an alto recorder anymore, either.

I walk around the school. Because everyone disappeared in the middle of the festival preparations, it all looks horribly unnatural and I feel as if I'm wandering around in a diorama. There are no footsteps besides mine. The absence of life is so thorough that not even ghosts could exist here.

I keep carefully looking around the school like I'm going through a checklist. There is no soul here.

No matter where I look, there is no soul.

When I had a murderous task to focus on, it was all the same—time was irrelevant and kept accelerating, so that in the end, a day felt as brief as the time it takes to prepare some instant noodles. But now that there is no one around me, time has changed its form like a shapeshifter; it has elongated monstrously. I lost my sense of time and a minute now feels like an hour.

I feel as if the inflated time is choking me. But that's not all: the concept of time acquires a razor-sharp form and keeps cutting my skin, only to suddenly change its form again and crush me under its weight. It then starts pulling on my limbs as if I'm a rubber doll. I shudder. How long until my arms and legs will be cut off, my insides will be squashed and my head will be torn off?

But the most terrifying thing is that these are all merely hallucinations, and that there is a collective word to describe what I'm living through.

Solitude.

I leave the school. The trains at the station aren't operating and are all empty. I get on the first bicycle I find and return home. Of course, nobody's there—I killed and erased Luu-chan and my parents long ago.

It's natural that they aren't there, but I don't like it.

All of a sudden, I get angry.

I want to see their faces.

I want to see someone.

I get on the bicycle again and head someplace where I'm likely to find people.

The shopping district.

—No one.

The amusement park.

—No one.

The shopping mall.

—No one.

The stadium.

—No one.

—No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one. No one.

Maria's apartment.

—No one.

I'll hang myself here today.

124,622nd time

I'm confined to the now purposeless Flawed Bliss. Ten iterations have passed, but I'm still alone. It goes without saying that I have continued to kill myself during that time.

After crossing a large bridge, I arrive at the bordering prefecture. Ever since people disappeared, I've been walking around all day. *Why?* In search of people. *Why?* Because I have to be alone. I need to kill every last person. *Kill?* Yeah, kill. *Even though I'm craving for someone to observe me?* No one is allowed to be here or I won't be able to meet Maria. *But I want someone to look at me, don't I?* Yeah, I do.

I want to talk with someone. No matter who. I can't tell for sure if I really exist otherwise! It doesn't matter if he's the worst person alive, just give me a reaction. Being alone means losing anything and everything. Quick. Quick, let me out of this world! Do I ... do I have to destroy even more? I take out a knife and cut my body into shreds. Still not enough? I thought so.

As my consciousness fades away, I die yet again.

124,628th time

—Clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank.

Solitude: this kind of torture is different from what I imagined. I thought it would be silent and slowly fill me with despair.

But I was wrong. The torture of solitude is much more violent and direct; it keeps beating my head like an iron bat.

—Clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank-clank.

It hurts. Stop it. Unable to bear the pain, I vomit and start to cry. How many times has it been? But the solitude won't show any mercy. It keeps beating me until I lose consciousness, and whenever that happens, I go on a trip through time that takes forever to recover from.

The Flawed Bliss imposed many trials. I had to kill myself countless times, I had to kill others countless times, and I even had to kill my beloved ones.

That was incredibly difficult. Those were some difficult trials to bear.

However, it is also true that I grew accustomed to those forms of suffering.

But solitude is different. Its overwhelming weight is growing time after time. It's simply not possible to get accustomed to it.

I keep thinking. If I don't, the person that is me will disappear because of the lack of any observers. I try to come up with something meaningful, but that's pretty difficult. Meaning does not exist without the presence of another living being. Solitude even deprives me of thought. Meaningless. Everything is meaningless. I am meaningless. There is a limit to deceiving myself by counting prime numbers.

One time, I tried to avoid committing suicide, hoping that everything would reset itself. Yeah, I tried to erase my retained memories after all I've done, fully aware that it would render my efforts null and void. In other words, I admitted defeat. I gave in to solitude.

But even when I refrained from killing myself, I was still alone in this world. Solitude attacked me immediately after I awoke in my classroom and reminded me of everything I've done. I cannot escape from solitude. I'm not even allowed to accept defeat. It keeps pouring poison down my throat.

124,645th time

I decided to hop on a motorbike and tour the world in search of people.

Delusions are the only things left that barely hold my mind together: the delusion that there's still someone else on this planet other than me, or the delusion that this other person might be Maria. Thanks to these delusions I can still count myself as part of the group of living beings. I will be done for once I admit that there are no other people in the world. I will become unable to think. If I stop having delusions, I will effectively turn into a living stone.

That would be worse than death.

I step on the gas. Obviously there's no point in accelerating, but the solitude keeps pushing me from behind.

Unable to make a sharp corner in time, I crash into a guardrail and get launched into the air. My left leg is broken and bent the wrong way, but to my horror, there is no pain. My brain scrapped that function because there is no meaning in feeling pain in a world without inhabitants.

I try to scream out—and fail because I forgot how to scream.

124,750th time

I can no longer ride a motorbike because I lost the ability to handle sophisticated tools. This world maintains my body in its initial state, so there shouldn't be a problem with my brain, but my intellect is clearly withering. I'm also starting to have trouble with reading and writing. My consciousness is so fragmented that I don't know how many iterations have passed since I've been left alone.

My will power is undergoing even more severe degradation: I can no longer walk around in search of people even if I want to. I'm increasingly losing the power to stand up and often spend all day lying still in the classroom.

My memories are fading. I don't know who I am. Well, I do somehow remember my name: Kazuki Hoshino. But I can't remember what kind of person he was, what he liked, what he disliked, and what he lived for.

I only recall the names of my friends from time to time. The name "Mogi" keeps popping up occasionally, but I can't for the life of me remember that person's first name. I think it was a really important person. Suddenly, the name "Haruaki" crosses my mind, so I try pronouncing it, but I can't think of that person's face.

I'm sure I will soon forget how to speak. That frightens me, but there's nothing I can do. I've long since forgotten how to express emotions with my face. Even if someone were to look at me, he would certainly be unable to know what I'm thinking.

But.

But, there is one thing I mustn't forget.

I shout.

"Maria!"

"Maria!"

"Maria!"

When I chant that name, my body mysteriously starts to move without any intervention from my will. My mind and my body are separated from each other. All I can do is watch myself as I move. It feels like watching myself through a camera.

Where is my body going? There is no meaning to be found anywhere in this empty world, so where am I going?

After walking along a familiar path, I arrive at the apartment complex Maria used to live in. I climb the emergency stairs to room 403, take out my key and unlock the door.

The room is filled with a scent of peppermint. That's just a hallucination, though; there is nothing in this room that would smell like that. My memory is playing a trick on me.

But it calms me down even though it's just an illusion.

It gives me hope.

124,753rd time

After that, I formed the habit of going straight to Maria's room after waking up at school.

I would arrive at her room and find comfort in the peppermint scent.

Rinse and repeat.

125,589th time

i wake up at school

i go to marias place

"Maria," i say

im trying to say "Maria" but i dont know if im really speaking aloud

i arrive at her room. i smell something. i dont know what its called but its Maria's smell

i suddenly feel good

why arent you here Maria? im lonely, i wanna see you, please come out, i do not wish for anything else, i want to see you, i want to see you, i want to see you

—Bang, bang!

i slam against the wall. answer me. let me hear your voice just for a moment. please, while i still can understand words

—Bang, bang!

my fists are starting to bleed. i dont care. i cant sense pain anyway

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

125,770th time

i walk. same place like always. i slam wall
—Bang, bang!
i want to see you
soon, i will not understand word anymore
i want to see you

126,779th time

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!



127,888th time

—Bang, bang!

"Color me impressed."

—Bang, bang!

"...Oh, you're not even going to look at me even though we haven't met in 350 years from your point of view? Well, you seem to have lost the ability to perceive other beings, let alone recognize me. You lost your mind, you forgot how to speak, you can't keep a single thought in your head, you have no will. You keep pounding on the wall for a single reason—the desire to reach Maria Otonashi. Madness is the only way to describe this. How can you keep up the act of pounding on the wall when you have degenerated to a being devoid of thought? I suppose it is similar to how insects keep collecting nutrition. The act of seeking Maria Otonashi has turned into a basic need."

—Bang, bang!

"You seek that girl so desperately that you are tearing at your soul and throw away the essence of your humanity."

—Bang, bang!

"You're a truly fearsome opponent, but this too shall pass. Even your soul has a limit. Once there is nothing left and your attachment to Maria Otonashi disappears, this world will vanish. I shall be here to witness that moment."

—Bang, bang!

"...I have to admit, though, this noise is getting on my nerves."

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

128,000th time

—Bang, bang!

130,000th time

—Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

"Unbelievable. You are still at it? This noise is seriously getting on my nerves."

140,000th time

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

"...I know this is impossible, but could it be that you will *never* stop? That there is no end to this process? Will you keep banging on this wall? In that case, you are neither man nor beast, and not even a machine or a thing, because neither of them is timeless. But you cannot be described as a god either, because gods come and go as the cultures of their worshippers evolve. And yet you keep banging on the wall."

—Bang, bang!

"What are you...?"

—Bang, bang!

"Who are you?"

150,000th time

—Bang, bang!

"I am the very personification of this box and bound to it. Therefore, I cannot get away from the sound of your banging on the wall."

—Bang, bang!

"How is it possible that I'm the one who is losing patience when I'm not even human? How can you outlast me when I'm only formless power given the ability to think?"

200,000th time

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

"Stop it already!"

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

"I told you to stop!"

—Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

"Are you trying to open a hole in the box? That's not technically possible. It's like cutting the planet into halves with a spoon. If you had success with such a primitive method nonetheless, there would be only one way to refer to it."

—Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

—Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

"A miracle."

400,000th time

—Bang, bang!

"...Oh, who would have thought that it would end like this? It seems like I can no longer maintain my form. While I do not know if you should be happy about it..."

—Bang, bang!

"...you win."

forget

—Bang, bang!

i

—Bang, bang!

do

"Maria"

not

"Maria"

i reach out



If I abandoned you, I would be released from this pain. I would live on. But before long, I would end up seeking you again, for all my actions are ultimately devoted to you and only you. All I want is to stay on target and walk straight ahead—ignoring the losses and opposition, and even the results. That's all I can do. Some people might call it an obsession, others may deem it a miracle—but to me and many others, my driving rationale couldn't be more obvious and natural. There are people who understand this and there are people who don't, and I simply happen to belong to the first group. The only difference is whether they have noticed that they don't need *boxes* to make their wishes come true, and what it means to fulfill a wish.

My commitment to find you comes with great suffering. Not once have I thought it's easy. For your sake, I laughed, cried, and yelled. Because of you, I destroyed my heart, my body, and the world. Still, I'm only really alive when I'm touching the fragment of you that I carry within me.

Even if I don't reach you in the end...

Even if I know the horrible outcome that awaits me...

I will keep searching for you, who dwells inside Maria.

I'm going to vanish. Maybe I'm getting my just deserts for being too greedy with my wish. To be honest, part of me regrets that we met, but if I were to choose between a life in which we met and a life in which we didn't, I would always pick the former. Always. I'm sure of that, even though I may be hesitating over, wavering about, and regretting my choices all the time.

I will not have accomplished anything by the time I vanish, and I'm certainly not mature enough to say that I can accept that.

Even now, I'm still dreaming—

...that my efforts might be rewarded with some kind of happy ending.



四章

C h a p t e r 4

—Bang, bang!

I may have some mental issues. Ever since I destroyed Deadlock Among Mirrors, I've repeatedly heard someone banging on a wall. This has gone on for a whole week now.

Something tells me that I mustn't ignore this sound. While I'm aware of how silly it is to obey a hallucination, I can't seem to ignore it any longer; I will search for the origin.

Even though the sound seems to be coming from somewhere nearby, it takes me quite some time to reach its source. I end up traveling through two prefectures before arriving at a decrepit train station in a disappointingly unspectacular suburban town.

While the area is quite generic, I feel at home for some reason. I've probably been here before, although it doesn't matter since I can't remember it anyway. It ... shouldn't matter.

—Bang, bang!

The noise has grown louder. I must be very close to its source.

I walk through the streets of this familiar yet foreign town and stop before a relatively new apartment complex. There's no doubt about it: the sound is coming from one of the apartments. Guided by the sound, I climb the emergency stairs.

Aah ... I'll finally see him again.

—Hm? Who?

It turns out that the sound is coming from room 403. I try turning the doorknob and notice that the door is unlocked. After making up my mind, I open the door.

I immediately recognize the figure in front of me and yell:

"—O!"

The non-human being turns around and smiles at me. Apparently, O was expecting me.

"What is the meaning of this...?"

O has the appearance of a woman with long black hair who, upon closer inspection, doesn't look much older than I am. Her youth, however, is overshadowed by how charmingly beautiful she is.

On top of that, O's appearance slightly resembles mine.

—Bang, bang!

How surprising—the sound is coming from inside her.

"...So you're the source of that noise? What's your goal? To draw me here? What a roundabout way to go about it..."

Suddenly, I notice that O has become slightly transparent. Deep lines of exhaustion are carved upon her face.

While I'm still trying to figure out what's going on, she slowly walks up to me.

"Maria."

I wrinkle my brow. O has never before called me by my name, and yet it makes me feel nostalgic.

Unable to cope with these feelings, I lose my composure.

O gently wraps my cheeks in her hands.

"I wanted to stay by your side, Maria. I really did."

"What are you talking about...?"

"But it seems like I can no longer do that. The time has come to say farewell."

"Seriously, what are you talking about?!" I shout, confused by her nonsense, but O just keeps gently smiling at me.

"It's time to give up."

"...Huh?"

"It's time to give up your *wish*."

I get even more confused.

"W-What...? I will never give up on my wish to make everyone in the world happy. Never."

I'm sure she's just trying to confuse me with pointless banter, like she always does.

Still, I can't bring myself to shake off the hands that are warming my cheeks. Despite all the ordeals I've overcome and all the advice I've ignored in pursuit of my wish, I can't seem to shrug off her words.

—Bang, bang, bang, bang!

The banging noise coming from inside O grows even louder.

"We have been defeated."

"...Defeated? By whom?"

O just smiles silently, as if to indicate that the answer should be obvious.

"Maria. You can no longer avert your eyes from the past," she softly warns me with a smile. It reminds me of—

"—Ah."

Now I understand. So that's who O was imitating...

"No...! Don't you dare...!"

Memories of the past are being forcibly shoved into my head.

The past.

The past.

I frantically shake my head. Stay away. I don't need my past. I don't want to see it. I don't want to know about it. I don't want to recall it.

But O won't release me and tightens her hold on my cheeks.

"Maria. You have to go to battle; you have to face your strongest enemy. I'm afraid it's a battle that you can't win. I know that from experience. He is going to utterly defeat you."

I can't think of my enemy's name, but I know with an odd certainty that he is willing to sacrifice himself and all of his friends in order to crush my wish.

What's even more terrifying, however, is the fact that my heart is warming up for some reason.

I'm frozen in place in the face of this terrifying discovery. O suddenly embraces me, and I can't shake her off.

Aah ... I must be hallucinating, but a mix of various scented oils and perfumes—a mix of aromas—is tickling my nose. This nostalgic fragrance, it's—

—It's Aya-oneechan's scent.

"Now, Maria, do your best."

I slowly sink into Onee-chan's body. It's like I'm getting caught up in cobwebs. Bit by bit, I'm consumed by her body.

This place is our sanctuary. Our world that no one must intrude upon.

However.

There is still a sound.

—Bang, bang!

—Bang, bang!

I'm falling ... falling ... falling ever so slowly, but the bottom is still far away. It's as though I were floating in the depths of the ocean, yet it's as bright as day—I can clearly make out little bubbles in the transparent water. This place is so pure, so just, so fair. Aah, what a comfortable place! It might be cold and suffocating, but it's still my paradise.

I can hear voices: *hahahaha!*, they laugh, *hahahahahahaha!* they laugh with joy. Though flawed, this place is full of bliss. While sinking deeper into the ocean, I pass by several little worlds. Since every single one of them is brimming with happiness, I start to smile. My actions weren't futile, after all.

As I sink deeper, I suddenly touch one of these little worlds. I find myself surrounded by light and get drawn in.

Like God himself—if I may say so—I'm floating in the sky and can view the entire world in a single glance.

The world is built around a loving couple. It's their little world.

The two of them are sitting on the bank of a lake, leaning against each other. I can faintly hear the tweeting of wild birds from the deep green forest that surrounds the lake. The surface of the lake is twinkling in the sunlight as if to celebrate their love.

Yeah, call it flawed if you will, but this is undoubtedly a world of happiness.

"Hm?"

As a side effect of using the Flawed Bliss, I should have forgotten about this couple, but for some reason—maybe it's because they're right in front of me, maybe it's because I'm inside the Flawed Bliss—I recognize them. I used my box on them in the real world.

It's Nana Yanagi and Touji Kijima. They were a couple, but their relationship was already broken by the time I met them. There were simply too many issues standing between them.

They were suffering because of their dysfunctional relationship. Nana Yanagi was in a particularly horrible state; she even considered killing her lover because their relationship was going to end anyway. Simply preventing that violent act would have only attacked the symptoms without addressing the underlying problem. Therefore, I concluded that there was no way to ease their suffering and used the Flawed Bliss.

They were saved and now they live in this peaceful world.

"This...! This is exactly the peace I wanted to grant them!"

There won't be any problems anymore—only nice and gentle things exist here, after all. Their affection toward each other will stay pure and undistorted for eternity.

At the moment, my box may be flawed and only able to create happiness in little secluded worlds, but if I manage to create a perfect version, I'll be able to truly fulfill my wish.

(I won't let that happen.)

"Huh...?"

It's as if a voice is speaking directly into my head.

Splat!

Suddenly, a grotesque *something* falls down from the sky, even though only nice things are supposed to exist in this world.

"Eeeh? What's that?" Nana Yanagi asks as she inclines her head, noticing the ugly thing that just appeared.

It's a dark red lump of meat that resembles a tangle of internal organs, and is pulsing in an eerie manner like a heart. *Thump thump thump!*

"Eww ... that's disgusting."

She had little time to say anything more: the pulsating dark red lump of meat starts growing rapidly and fills the entire lake in no time.

"Eek! No...! Stay away! It's disgusting!"

The lump causes the trees to rot, turns the water into sludge, and charges at the two of them. As they let out a blood-curdling scream, they are buried under the lump.

In a matter of moments the beautiful world transforms into a grotesque lump.

"What the hell is going on here...?"

Everything happened so fast I could only watch. It's over. My ideal has been destroyed. A fiendish, grotesque lump has spoiled it all.

Unable to maintain its artificial bliss, the world bursts and I get thrown back into the brightly-lit ocean.

"What happened...? What's happening...?"

—Bang, bang!

There's that sound again; I turn around and discover a hazy, undulating shadow that is shaped like a person and seems to be on the brink of dispersal.

(A ... ah...)

His voice resembles the voice that I heard in my head earlier.

"Was that you? Did you destroy that world?"

(Stop it!)

"Hm?"

(Stop it!)

I keep listening, but the shadow won't say anything else. I then try reaching out for it; the shadow falls apart and disappears.

"...What was that all about?"

It clearly wasn't created by me. But while the shadow was tremendously fragile, I'm certain that it is the creator of that dark red lump of meat.

I look around. There are human-shaped shadows all around me that I didn't notice when I was focused on the beautiful worlds.

When I perk up my ears, I hear their voices:

(Save me...) (I'm lonely.) (I don't want to be alone, I hate solitude.) (Anyone? Please, anyone?) (Just kill me already.) (Stop it stop it stop it stop it!)

"...Seriously, what the..."

There is nothing but agony in their voices.

While I'm deep in thought regarding the identity of these shadows, my vision turns white again. I've been drawn into yet another little world and find myself once again in a position where I can look down at everything.

I see a spacious, tranquil park with gleaming fields of golden wheat nearby. In the middle of the park, two boys and a girl are playing catch together. The black-haired girl, who is wearing glasses, is clearly a horrible player; the two boys are throwing the balls in gentle arcs, but she still doesn't manage to catch anything. That being said, they are enjoying themselves anyway and laughing non-stop.

I didn't need to watch closely to recognize that the handsome boy and the girl are in love with each other. The second boy, who is taller than the first one, is watching them with a warm smile.

Aah, I see. This is—

"Daiya Oomine's happy world."

When he became an *owner*, Oomine tried to change the world by making fools aware of their sins, but he eventually failed. He committed a number of sins during that time, ended up getting cornered, and was stabbed by a fanatic believer before he could come up with a way to atone for his mistakes.

I ran into him as he was dying, and used the Flawed Bliss on him.

His playmates are the middle school versions of Kokone Kirino and Haruaki Usui. Oomine and I teamed up to accomplish his wish, but now I know better; what he really wanted wasn't a revolution, but only this: a simple place where Kokone Kirino can smile without care.

His wish has come true in this world.

There's no hope for this to happen in reality. For one thing, Oomine can't survive, and for another thing, Kirino has taken too much mental damage as it is and wouldn't be able to cope with the news of Oomine's death. Usui would also continue to suffer from their tragic fates.

Reality is way too extreme and way too cruel.

Even if it's just a sweet dream, it's the happiest outcome there can be.

Ah, and still—

"And still you want us to face reality?!"

Splat!

Again. Again, a grotesque foreign body invades this happy world.

"Don't ... Don't...!"

Don't try to destroy a happiness that can only come to be with the help of a box!

"Oomine's your friend, right? Right?! You should be able to understand that Oomine *needs* this box even if it's flawed! Please stop ... please!"

I scream—

"Kazuki!"

—His name.

"Ah!"

Right, I remember now. *That's* my enemy.

"Hm? What's that?"

By the time the younger version of Oomine notices the foreign body, the lump of meat has already started expanding.

As the lump grows, the golden wheat fields rot away and lose their luster, and the healthy ground turns into mud. The sky above them is stained black and purple, and the three of them are constrained by the ever growing meat. No matter how loudly they cry, the red lump keeps growing. Before long, it absorbs them and grotesquely covers the entire world.

This world has ended as well.

Daiya Oomine's world of happiness is no more.

Again, I'm thrown back into the bottom of the sea.

"...Why, Kazuki...? Why...?"

In front of my eyes is yet another hazy shadow. It's not Kazuki, exactly, but I know that it's related to him.

"Cut it out...! Who do you think you are?! What gives you the right to ruin the happiness of others?!" I yell angrily, but the shadow keeps repeating the same thing.

(It hurts, it hurts, it hurts...)

I touch the shadow and it disperses again. That probably means that my words haven't reached him.

"Kazuki ... what in the world have you done to my box? What are you doing right now...?"

I look around. The eerie shadows have started to assemble around me as if to hunt down their prey.

However, the shadows just meaninglessly repeat the same words.

(No ... no...) (Save me) (Kill me) (I'm lonely) (I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry) (Anyone, please, anyone look at me) (Ughhhhh) (I want to see you!)

(Maria!)

(Maria!)

(Maria!)

I clench my teeth and shake them off.

The shadows disperse at once.

I keep sinking deeper into the sea. Endlessly.

How long have I been wandering around here, I wonder? Quite some time must have passed.

As I sank and sank, I visited various little, blissful worlds. All of them were pleasant and filled with continuous laughter, and every single one of them was corrupted by this grotesque red lump of meat.

At first, I was angry. Why would Kazuki do something like that? What's so great about getting in my way? But then I slowly started to get scared; I noticed the horrible madness hidden behind the methods he must have employed. I began to grow worried about Kazuki. Was he okay after doing all this? Could he maintain his sanity?

After seeing another world getting devoured by the meat lump, I whisper: "Kazuki ... I want to talk with you."

What are you thinking? What are you doing? I want to know.

I thought I would keep sinking deeper, but apparently I was wrong: the water is no longer transparent, but has started to assume a dark color and turned sticky, much like coal tar. All the negative emotions that were born within this box have settled here; this sedimentary layer of distress forms the bottom of the sea.

I discover yet another little world here.

It seems like this world is to blame for the strange incidents and for the accumulation of distress.

Making up my mind, I enter this little world.

Right from the moment I entered, I felt a fundamental difference from all the other worlds. Its air stings my skin as if there were sand grains floating about, and the sky is stained blood red. The ground is covered by countless lumps of meat right from the beginning, but none of them are growing or pulsing.

As expected, I'm just a spectator here as well. Suddenly, however, something approaches me as I'm floating in the sky. It's a distortion in space, a "sediment", that barely looks like a human being.

(Maria)

That voice and that name...

"Kazuki! It's you, isn't it?!"

But the sediment just says:

(I'm afraid I can't respond to you, since this is just a message I left for you in the hope that you might come here someday. No ... I didn't actually leave this message on purpose; it's really just an echo of the past.)

"Where is this? Ah ... you can't answer me, huh?"

(You must be wondering what place this is, Maria. It is the world I was locked in by the Flawed Bliss and where I was supposed to be happy.)

The sediment cuts off its explanation and floats away as if to guide me somewhere. I silently follow it.

We arrive at the roof of the school building.

I look down and start to observe. As in the other little worlds, I'm a spectator who can "see" more than just what's in front of my eyes. It's hard to describe this peculiar sensation, but I can feel the world with all my body.

The school is noisier than I remembered. Apparently, a school festival is going to be held, and the students are busy with the final preparations. Among them are faces that I recognize.

I also discover Oomine and Kirino; they seem to be on very good terms in this world.

I reluctantly continue to look for someone else; there is only one person I want to see right now.

"Kazuki!" I shout, finding him as he leaves the school building. "Ah..."

I don't want to admit it, but my heart starts to pound faster just from seeing him. I can't get rid of the urge to be with him, no matter how many times he gets in my way. I want him to notice me – to turn around and see me.

But then I notice something else: Kazuki is pushing a wheelchair occupied by Kasumi Mogi. They are happily navigating the festival like a couple.

"..."

Mixed feelings well up within me. It's only natural that Mogi would be by his side; she always wanted to confess her love to him, after all. While she would have met with an accident either way, she would have eventually won Kazuki over if not for the boxes.

"Yeah ... that's right..."

Kazuki doesn't need me.

I'm not needed.

"I do not exist in a world where Kazuki can be happy. No—"

If anything, I'm an obstacle.

Kazuki used to believe that there is no despair that can't be overcome by everyday life, but his belief was taken from him when a foreign body invaded his life and drove him insane. I got him involved with boxes.

In other words—

"I brought calamity upon Kazuki."

Therefore I have no right to be by his side.

But even though I may have realized this, neither the world nor the sediment release me; I feel depressed as I'm forced to watch them spend the day together.

The festival ends and the campfire ceremony begins. The students start to dance to the tune of the Oklahoma Mixer. Kazuki and Mogi are side by side, peacefully watching the flames.

Mogi gently—almost as if trying to capture a soap bubble—takes Kazuki's hand and looks into his eyes.

I immediately realize what she is going to say.

"I love you, Kazu-kun."

After gazing deeply into her eyes, Kazuki smiles and answers:

"I love you, too, Mogi-san!"

With the most beautiful of smiles, Mogi says, "Let's be together forever."

"Absolutely."

Yeah, there's nothing here for me to see anymore.

Kazuki has found happiness. In that case, I should leave now.

I look at the sediment again.

"I've seen enough. Return me to the sea."

The sediment remains silent.

"Don't worry. I'll leave Kazuki alone. I will hold no grudge against him even if he breaks the Flawed Bliss beyond repair. Actually it's the opposite: he has all the reasons in the world to loathe me. He has earned the right to forget about me and start over. But I won't change. I will keep searching for

a way to make everyone in the world happy, with or without the Flawed Bliss."

I didn't expect an answer, and yet the sediment opens its mouth to provide a response:

(I bet you're getting silly ideas right now, Maria. You must be suffering under the absurd illusion that an everyday life together with Mogi-san is supposed to mean happiness to me, and that you should leave.)

"What?"

(Don't underestimate my madness.)

Suddenly, the world gets painted over in dazzling white.

"What happened...?"

An instant later, the world has returned to normal. The sky remains crimson and the red meat lumps are still where they were before, but something feels different. The campfires in the school yard have gone out and the students are again preparing for the festival.

After a while, I finally realize what happened.

"Did time just reset? Are they experiencing the day of the festival once again...?"

Once more, Kazuki appears before me, pushing a wheelchair.

"It won't ... just end happily?"

As a spectator, my sense of time is different from Kazuki's. It's similar to watching a computer game; even though a lot of time elapses, I don't get very tired.

I have to repeatedly witness how they enjoyed their day together. Countless are the number of times that Mogi confesses her love to Kazuki, and he accepts.

I'm aware of my feelings for Kazuki. I think of him tenderly and wish to hug and squeeze him—to make him mine. Every time I witness them confirm their love, my heart suffers anew.

"What's this all about? Is this supposed to be a punishment? Are you trying to get your revenge by showing me what I can't ever have?" I ask the sediment, but unlike before, it doesn't happen to have an answer recorded for me. "...No, I shouldn't be calling it a 'punishment.' I should be delighted to see that Kazuki's happy. My own feelings are irrelevant."

While clenching my teeth, I keep watching Mogi confess and Kazuki accepting her confessions. However, as the sediment had warned me, much worse was to come.

The change occurs during the tenth iteration.

"Please wait until tomorrow," Kazuki says bitterly in response to Mogi's confession.

As if haunted by something, he disappears into the school building and leaves a baffled Mogi behind.

He eventually reappears on the rooftop. Without hesitation he climbs the fence.

"What is he doing...? He wouldn't want to jump off, would he...? ...?! I see, he must have noticed that the world is repeating itself, so he..."

As he gazes at the ground with bated breath, Kazuki whispers:

"Maria!"

"———!"

Kazuki jumps to his death for the sole purpose of meeting me.

But the world marches on. Kazuki seems to remember the previous iteration: he ignores his duties of looking after Mogi and dashes out of school in search of me.

"Stop it, Kazuki..."

It's futile. You won't find me. This is a world that can only exist without me, and you should know that.

"You don't need me to be happy! You have Mogi! You have Haruaki and your friends. They will support you. You simply have to stop looking for me ... and yet!"

Because he was unable to find me, Kazuki commits suicide again to retain his memories.

He spills out the contents of his head before my eyes.

Kazuki's meaningless search for me went on. He repeatedly committed suicide and transformed into nothing more than a lump of meat. A sane person wouldn't be able to keep committing such violent acts, and indeed, Kazuki slowly went mad and lost both reason and wit. But he kept looking for me.

The number of times I cried, "Stop!" were countless, but Kazuki would keep dying before my eyes.

With time the sky grew redder and the number of corpses increased. At last, I realized *why* this world looked so strange and differed from all the other worlds.

Kazuki himself was dyeing the sky bloody. It was he who created the meat lumps covering the ground. By dying, he was defeating the purpose of this world.

Kazuki has been doing this long before I started watching. It's by no means the first time he has regained his memory and continuously killed himself.

He is defying the Flawed Bliss. The effects of fighting off happiness couldn't be contained in this little world alone; he inflicted damage on the Flawed Bliss itself bit by bit, which showed up in its other worlds as destructive foreign bodies.

This kind of violence is no different from suicide bombing; no one will benefit from it.

"How can I stop Kazuki...?"

Even when he gives up on retaining his memories and decides to become happy with Mogi, it never lasts for long. Eventually, he always realizes that the world is repeating itself and starts killing himself again. He has been repeating this over and over.

This is hell. For both him and me.

However, *I* am the one who created this hell in the first place.

"Is this..."

Is *this* the happiness I wished for? Something that is so vulnerable to distortion?

In that case, my box has to be dest—

—No, I mustn't jump to conclusions. The other people I used it on didn't realize that it was all fake and managed to enjoy themselves.

Kazuki is an exception; there is something "special" about him that makes him see through the deception and keeps pushing him to resist.

"I don't get it ... what triggered it?"

His feelings for me? But he's hardly doing it for my sake. In all honesty, I'd rather he forgot about me than suffer so much. If I could, I would gladly

enter that hell in his stead. It's way harder on me to see him suffer than to suffer myself.

Kazuki should know my preferences.

"Kazuki ... come to your senses. Nobody is wishing for what you're doing. It's not too late. Forget about me and find your own happiness!"

However, for the first time in a long while, the sediment speaks up again.

(Heh, that was just the beginning.)

I was dumbfounded, but I would soon find out that this was neither a lie nor an exaggeration.

Kazuki's hell changed once more for the worse, and began tormenting him in every imaginable way.

He resorted to an absolutely taboo act: He killed Mogi. He killed his friends. He killed his family. He killed innocent citizens.

He wants to rid the world of people so that there's no room for happiness anymore.

Murdering is way more damaging to Kazuki than committing suicide. If he keeps doing it, not much of his mind will be left by the time he manages to get out of the box. He will be tormented by horrible pangs of remorse for the rest of his life.

"Stop it, Kazuki ... stop it already..."

I'm sure Kazuki is well aware of the consequences of his actions, yet he kills for the sake of getting to meet me. He's unstoppable.

Because of his murderous acts, cracks start to spread throughout this world.

Aah ... they represent my own wavering heart. My faith in the Flawed Bliss is swaying.

Kazuki eventually succeeded in erasing the other members of this world.

The absence of external life also means that there is no meaning to his own life. One's meaning is created by the existence of an observer. Being all alone, Kazuki has gradually been losing his capabilities as a human. He can no longer ride a motorbike, he can no longer operate an elevator, he can no longer write, and he is forgetting how to speak.

Kazuki is becoming incapable of doing anything.

"Good heavens...!" I lament. "He ... doesn't have anything anymore, does he? He lost it all!"

As false as this world may be, he can't hope to ever recover from a loss this great. Kazuki is beyond help, even if I were to destroy the Flawed Bliss.

"He lost even more than I did!"

However, Kazuki doesn't stop even though he lost all his abilities, and is repeatedly drawn to a certain place. Though barely conscious, he never fails to arrive at my old room. He then starts calling my name and knocking on the wall. Over and over. He keeps meaninglessly banging his fists against the wall over a nearly infinite period of time. My name eventually starts to fade from his memory, but he doesn't stop pounding on the wall. Kazuki has no heart anymore; he's just executing a program he once set up.

—Bang, bang!

Ah ... now I see...

The sound that I kept hearing ... was Kazuki calling to me.

—Bang, bang!

He has been calling to me, all the while abrading his soul and becoming hollow. As a mere spectator, I cannot comprehend how long he has been beating the wall from his point of view, but it must be the equivalent of many human lifetimes. For a near-eternity, Kazuki has been pounding on the wall.

For the sole purpose of meeting me.

For the sole damned purpose of meeting me!

"Ugh ... ah..."

Can I not answer his feelings in any way?

"Kazuki!" I shout. "Kazuki! I'm here, Kazuki!"

Even though I know it's futile, I keep shouting at the top of my lungs.

"Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki! Kazuki!"

I stand in front of him and shout his name.

However, he doesn't notice me, nor can I touch him.

There is an exasperating gap between us. My box separates us like a wall.

—Bang, bang!

Kazuki is wordlessly crying for help. *Save me, it hurts, stop it.* The shadows I came across in the ocean were tangible manifestations of the underlying emotions that drove his banging.

Kazuki should have that freedom to stop anytime.

But even though there's no assurance whatsoever whether he could reach me, he doesn't stop. No, he *can't*.

"Kazuki ... this isn't normal. You are insane. You are insane to go to such lengths just to see me!"

—Bang, bang!

"But..."

I have to admit it.

"But it makes me happy, Kazuki."

Of course I don't want him to suffer, but I can't deny the fact that I also feel happy that he is longing for me so deeply. While I'm aware of the ugliness of this emotion, I can't suppress it.

"I'll be honest: I may have claimed otherwise, but I was lonely and didn't want to be alone. I was happy to have you by my side. You noticed my true feelings, didn't you? That's why you are pounding on the wall like this, isn't it? It's for my sake..."

I try touching his head, but my hand slips right through.

"But I didn't choose you. I chose my wish of making everyone happy instead and parted from you. I had to leave you if I wanted to maintain my meaning of life."

And this is what came of my choice. Kazuki only had me; he couldn't endure being separated from me. He had no other choice but to go on a fruitless and agonizing search for me.

I'm responsible because I did not understand his true nature.

"Enough of this. Screw my 'meaning of life' – I don't care if I lose my meaning and become empty ... it's much worse to look on helplessly as you lose yourself. I want to save you, Kazuki! Because I ... I, lo—"

Suddenly, I notice something and touch my cheeks.

They're wet.

—Tears.

"This can't..."

I still have the ability to shed tears? I still have so much weakness in me?

No, I mustn't become aware of it.

"Ew ... ah ... WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The tears keep rolling down my cheeks.

"Kazuki ... Kazuki ... KAZUKI!"

Kazuki has brought back the weakness that I once disposed of.

He managed to change me.

In that case, I'm—

I'm no longer a *box*.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I was turned back into a human.

"If I'm no longer a box ... if I no longer have to devote myself to my wish..."

I scream.

"I don't care about my wish anymore! Just save Kazuki! Please, save him!
...Stop it ... Kazuki, I want to see you. I want to hear your voice. I want to feel
your warmth. I want you to look at me. I want you to look at me just one
more time. Kazuki ... Kazuki ... Kazukiii...!"

—Bang, bang, bang, bang!

"Come back to me ... bring back the good old days! Enough. Enough! I don't
want to lose my beloved ones anymore! I don't want to be alone anymore!
Please ... please ... please ... Kazuki ... Kazuki ... stay by my side...!"

Suddenly a thought crosses my mind. What if our positions were reversed?

I'm confident I would do the same things that he did, no matter how foolish
it seemed.

I would abandon everything for the sake of meeting him, even if I had to
neglect myself and he didn't wish for it.

With tears in my eyes, I smile bitterly, "We're ... we're strange, the two of us,
aren't we? Kazuki?"

No matter what, we'll try to reach each other.

No matter what, we'll try to live together.

I wonder why that is? I don't know. I don't know, but there is simply no other option.

"There's something that connects us."

"Something that we obtained."

"Something valuable that is far more powerful than *wishes*."

—Bang, bang!

"Can you not hear me, Kazuki?"

—Bang, bang!

"Can you really not hear me?"

—Bang, bang!

"Well, then I will have to make myself heard!"

I wipe off my tears and button up my lips.

I made up my mind.

I will destroy the Flawed Bliss and go meet Kazuki in order to stay by his side for all eternity, even if he's just a shadow of his former self.

—But is that possible?

Kazuki's situation isn't the only problem: my situation is just as problematic. Pursuing my *wish* forced me to push past my limits for a long time. When you stretch a string, it either rips or loosens, but it won't return to its initial state. If I lose the Flawed Bliss and all hope of ever obtaining a new box, I will probably be left in a mindless state. We can't be together like that.

—What should I do then?

(Find her)

My eyes widen as I hear his voice. The sediment is speaking to me.

(Find the Zeroth Maria who is still crying.)

"...Who or what is the Zeroth Maria? Will I really be able to be with Kazuki if I find her?"

However, the sediment is not able to answer. I can't even tell for sure whether or not its words were directed at my dilemma. Nonetheless, I decide to trust in its words.

After all, they're Kazuki's words.

I return to the no longer transparent sea and immediately notice a voice.

Why didn't that voice catch my attention until now? Because it was drowned by laughter? Because I didn't want to listen? At any rate, I now hear a voice I didn't notice earlier.

The weeping of a girl is echoing through the sea.

As much as I don't want to believe it, her voice sounds like mine.

The voice originates from the deepest point in the sea, surrounded by the black sediment of distress. I don't know what will happen if I dive into this gaping darkness—I might be trapped inside and drown—but I take a leap and jump into it without any hesitation.

The solidified darkness winds itself around me like viscous concrete, and a thick blackness spreads out before me. Darkness. Darkness. I can't breathe, I'm disgusted, I'm itchy, I'm scared, but I don't stop. I feel my way through the dark and follow the weeping.

"Uh, gh...!"

I'll be swallowed by the dark.

Just when I thought that, the black veil disperses and I arrive at a desolate place.

"This place..."

Ah ... I know this place. There's no way I could forget it.

The salty tang of the sea, a road that runs along the sea, unmaintained, cracked concrete, rusty red barriers, and beyond the cliff, an open, breathtaking view of the sea. The other side is occupied by a weedy hill and a few scrawny trees.

This desolate road took my family from me.

However, this place is neither reality nor memory. I wasn't here until it was already too late; the two cars had already been towed away from the site of the crash.

Thus, the two cars that have broken through the barrier and are falling down the cliff at this very moment are not real. It's just a virtual image.

That being said, the reproduction of the scene seems perfect and it all feels depressingly real. This daydream feels more real than reality.

The deaths I'm witnessing feel terribly real too.

Even if I reach out, hoping to save them, I can't even touch them because I'm just a spectator. I can only watch as my family's car flies past me and falls down the cliff. I can't change the past.

My father and the other driver died instantaneously. My mother passed away without ever regaining consciousness. My sister was still conscious but died during transport from blood loss. These are unchangeable facts.

This nightmare haunted me up until I lost my memory—no, even after that. However, this time a new actress makes her appearance.

It's me from my middle school days. I'm weeping bitterly by the hole in the barrier that was ripped open by the crash.

"Why...?" my former self blubbers as she looks down the cliff. "Why did you do this, Onee-chan?"

My former self is gazing at her blood-stained sister—Aya Otonashi—whose lower body was crushed in the accident.

Aya Otonashi starts crawling up the cliff. Even though she is about to die, she is still smiling; she still has that incredibly charming smile.

"You know why, don't you, Maria? I wanted to avenge myself on my family for creating the emptiness inside me!"

"That's not what you told me, Onee-chan!" I respond. "Didn't you plan to fill that emptiness by making all people happy?"

"That was my goal, yes, but not my only one. Revenge was just as important. I decided to leave my goal of making everyone happy to you, Maria."

"That's not something you can do...!"

"It is. The moment I lose my life, you will no longer be Maria Otonashi—" She smiles.

"You will be Aya Otonashi."

It's true that she made that prediction.

"I will now predict your future, Maria"

"You will become me—you will have to."

"By that I mean that you will have to make others happy."

"Maria, when I'm 14, I will leave this place."

"Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi."

Everything went according to her plan. She had the world in the palm of her hand. Aya Otonashi manipulated people and controlled time. She was more than just a mere human.

There was nothing that she couldn't do.

"I won't die even if I lose my body, Maria. I will overtake you, and live on through you. Once I've overtaken you, you will have no place left to exist. You will become a being whose only purpose is to pursue my *wish*. And if you abandon my wish, you will become an empty shell with no soul."

She's right.

I'm not Maria Otonashi. I'm Aya.

Kazuki showed me a sweet daydream, but I can't return to being Maria anymore.

Of course, I'll still destroy the Flawed Bliss and release him. That's set in stone.

But that's as far as I can go. I won't be able to be by his—

(Maria, you're not facing Aya Otonashi!)

My eyes widen with surprise.

I look at Kazuki's leftovers, that sediment, standing before me.

(Stop making up convenient lies about Aya Otonashi. Stop running away from reality.)

"...I'm running away, you say? That's nonsense, even if it's coming from you, Kazuki. For crying out loud, Aya Otonashi has me cornered! What's convenient about that, eh? Nonsense, I say. I didn't want to suffer, either, you know? I didn't ask for this struggle...!"

(Stop deifying Aya Otonashi.)

We are talking past each other. Well, that's only natural since the sediment can't actually react to my comments.

"Aya Otonashi is special. She has always been, from the moment we met. I think it's appropriate to call her superhuman," I say with a self-deprecatory laugh. "She actually knew in advance that she would take me over and that she would die on her birthday. And she took action. Not a single one of her prophecies was wrong. Aya Otonashi exceeded the bounds of humanity. She is truly special."

The sediment stays silent for a few moments.

Meanwhile, the remaining upper body of Aya Otonashi has grabbed my middle-school self. She grips me with blood-stained hands.

The sediment opens its mouth again:

(I went to the address where you used to live with your family and tried to find out as much as I could. It was easy to learn that you grew up in a complicated environment, but I didn't hear much about you, Maria. No one could tell me anything.)

"Well, I was a quiet child who didn't have any friends."

(But they all could tell me about Aya at great length. "Smart" and "beautiful" were the words they used to describe her. But I also learned that she was a real troublemaker even though she didn't cause any problems herself; incidents of all kinds kept occurring around her, and the older she got, the worse those incidents got as well.)

"Yeah, Aya Otonashi was that kind of girl, but so what? What are you getting at?" I say in a slightly irritated tone, though I don't know what is annoying me.

(Aya had the habit of saying that she wanted to make everyone in the world happy. Even her teacher at the time knew about it. When he realized that she was dead serious and really wanted to contribute to worldwide welfare, he decided not to talk her out of it and instead helped her with her plans.)

Plans?

The distortion in space continues:

(He backed her plans of studying abroad in New York after turning 14.)

"Huh? What...?"

(Apparently, she wanted to broaden her outlook on life to make the world a better place. She also planned to go to various other countries after traveling to America. She didn't even know when she would come back. Her teacher told

me that she somehow managed to persuade her parents, but that she couldn't bring herself to explain it to her clingy little sister.)

"Maria, when I'm 14, I will leave this place."

"D-Don't ... don't spout such nonsense! Aya Otonashi killed herself and her family on her birthday! She avenged herself and at the same time took me over! Go abroad? She would never—"

—Make such ordinary plans.

Do I *want* to think that way...? Yes ... I really seem to be hell-bent on deifying her...

Why? I ... I don't know. I also don't know why I'm so agitated.

(She always strove to sincerely help the people of the world. She was a smart girl and actively conceived and tested ways to achieve her goal. But at the end of the day, she was just a 13-year-old girl; her field of experience was limited to school and her ethics were still underdeveloped. However, she was aware of her weaknesses and decided to broaden her horizons by venturing into a new environment.)

I'm utterly confused, but the sediment continues without letting me take a breath.

(Do you really think such an ambitious girl would kill herself and her family for revenge? Do you think she would form reckless and silly schemes such as "planting her soul" inside you?)

"But she did! Aya Otonashi was able to do that and more!"

She's a special being that a commoner like me can't understand.

"I clearly remember her prophecies! She predicted that I was going to become her! And I did! I have completely devoted myself to her wish. What you're saying does not conform with this, Kazuki!"

(I was told that Aya was extremely worried about her little sister Maria, because unlike Aya, Maria wouldn't acknowledge the lack of parental love in the family and kept trying to escape from the truth. Aya couldn't bear to watch as her sister became indifferent and distrustful, failed to make any friends, and failed to pursue any life goals. Maria, she didn't want you to live an empty life. She wanted you to evolve. She wanted you to live passionately. Right, just like she did.)

"Maria Otonashi will become Aya Otonashi."

"Ah..."

(That's why she showed you her own way of life, including the ugly and erroneous parts. She wanted to show everyone how meaningful a life she and her sister could live. That's the truth behind Aya Otonashi's feelings for her little sister.)

"Let us begin, Maria! We may not bear a grudge against anyone, but we have a formless enemy who torments our minds. His name is emptiness. Let's show him—"

"How we take revenge!"

"...Stop it."

The sediment is about to shake my very foundations; it's stirring up my insides.

"Stop it. That's just your belief about her! Don't degrade my own!"

(I'm sure you won't believe me and you'll claim that Aya is special or some sort of prodigy, but somewhere in your mind, you should also find memories of her as an ordinary child. She may have not acted her age, but she was still just a 13-year-old girl.)

"I don't remember anything of the kind! Aya-oneechan has always been special and—"

"Ah ... uh ... uuh..."

The scene changes. This is more or less just a daydream anyway, so there's nothing I should be surprised by. However, the new setting leaves me shaken.

It's where we used to live, or more precisely, Aya-oneechan's room. I smell a mix of various perfumes and scented oils.

Aya-oneechan and I are present; we're both 10 years old or so. Aya-oneechan is lying on her bed while my 10-year-old self is giving her a worried look.

"What's wrong, Onee-chan?" my younger self asks as she shakes her sister's reactionless body. However, Aya stays still and absolutely refuses to show her face.

After a while at last, she opens her mouth.

"I lost..."

"Huh?"

"The national examination—you also had to take it at your school, right? I lost to someone in my class, even though I've never lost until now..."

"Eh? That's all? Things like that happen. There's no reason to be depressed about it, is there?"

"You know nothing, Maria," she answers in a deep, annoyed voice that silences me. "You don't understand the severity of this. The severity of my *losing*! I mustn't lose to anyone. I must prove worthier than anyone else. Everyone has to need me, or..."

—You should have never been born.

"Or I can't avenge myself on Rinko-san."

She firmly presses her face against her pillow and screams:

"Or I can't be proud of being born...!"

"Aya-oneechan..." As I watch this scene, her name escapes my lips.

Back in the day, I had no idea what was going on. I had no idea what made Aya-oneechan suffer. But now I understand.

Aya Otonashi was fighting a battle.

She was fighting the fact that she was born unneeded.

Aya Otonashi, who looked like a "pitiful child" to most, was—who would have thought it—really just a "pitiful child." She could not escape from the fact that neither Rinko-san nor her new parents needed her, and therefore tried to demonstrate her value by becoming someone special. Oftentimes she would blow past her limits and be downright reckless, but she held back her tears and kept fighting while bracing herself. The only thing that made Aya-oneechan feel alive was praise.

She worked harder than anyone else and continued to move forward without a single word of complaint. I have great respect for Aya-oneechan for growing strong like that.

But at the same time, there was undeniable weakness and fragility hidden beneath her mask of self-confidence.

(Aya Otonashi was just a human.)

"No..." I shake my head in denial.

I know that I'm behaving childishly, but I simply can't admit it.

"Aya-oneechan was special. She was a monster. She planned her death. She must have! Otherwise that would mean that she was killed meaninglessly by that obsessed freak! I don't want that. I don't want her death to be meaningless. Aya-oneechan took over my body. She could do that because she was a monster. Can't we leave it that way? If we don't—"

"—Aya-oneechan will die once and for all."

Before I know it, I'm back at the scene of the accident—but something is slightly different.

Aya-oneechan isn't crawling up the cliff like before; she's stuck inside the car. She is frantically pounding against the front window in an attempt to break it open; the car doors were damaged by the crash and won't open. Since she's sustained a fatal injury, there is no power in her fists and they barely make a sound as they pound against the glass.

"I don't want to die ... save me ... I don't want to end like this," she laments in a feeble voice. "It hurts ... it hurts! I don't want to die ... Maria! I don't yet ... want to die...!"

Needless to say, she is not smiling *at all*.

My younger self is holding a bouquet of flowers while looking down the cliff, unable to see her sister's pleading.

I mean ... I wasn't really there when it happened. I only went to the site the next day.

My younger self throws the bouquet down the cliff and whispers with vacant eyes:

"I won't accept this."

"I won't accept Aya-oneechan's death."

"Aya-oneechan is a superior being and can't die." "No one may kill her."

"She took me over." "I don't want to be left alone." "If I become Aya-oneechan, I won't be alone." "I'm not alone."

I recall what my relatives, who only ever thought of me as a bother, said.

—If Aya-oneechan's gone...

No one will need me.

I absolutely cannot endure that. I want her to need me, even if just as a ghost. I'll take on her will. I'll say she took me over. Aya-oneechan needed my body, therefore I must live for her goal of making everyone happy. Otherwise, it means that she didn't really need me.

I'm not alone.

Aya-oneechan lives on within me.

However, the sediment—Kazuki—confronts me with the truth.

(Maria Otonashi and her sister's wish was never to make everyone in the world happy.)

Right.

Our real *wish* is—

Because our parents didn't love us and ignored us., our real *wish* is—

(You want to be needed by someone.)

"We want to be needed by someone."

My tears won't stop. What should I do? I have to kill Aya-oneechan, but if I do, I will be all alone. No one will need me. If I abandon my box, I will lose hope and my will to live. Someone help me! Someone save me! Who will save me? No one. Why would anyone exist just for my sake? Why would I be so lucky to have my own kni—"

"—I can't believe it."

"—There is. There is someone who's devoted to me!"

Right.

I do have a savior.

I'm so lucky to have a savior just for me.

"I need you, Maria!"

—Kazuki Hoshino.

Kazuki said the thing I most wanted to hear.

In fact, what he said is the undeniable truth: If I don't go to him, he will continue to bang on the wall, unable to escape the loops.

I'm the only one who can save Kazuki.

Kazuki is the only one who can save me.

Kazuki desperately needs me.

I desperately need Kazuki.

I wipe away my tears.

We had to make a huge detour to get here, didn't we?

I should have just been honest with myself and admitted that I didn't want to leave him.

That was all.

That was all I had to do—

"—for my *wish* to come true."

I can safely destroy the Flawed Bliss now.

After all, I've just obtained the real thing.

In order to fulfill my true wish, I have to crush the false one. I have to kill the monster I made Aya-oneechan out to be with my own hands.

I walk up to Aya-oneechan, who's still struggling to escape the car and survive.

She won't survive. No matter how zealous she is and no matter how promising her future, she won't survive. She will die a gruesome and meaningless death.

"Aya-oneechan."

Since I can't interact with the past, my voice doesn't reach her.

However, she stops beating on the car window. She closes her eyes and sinks into her seat.

She has decided to accept her fate.

"I'm sorry for locking you inside such a terrible place for so long. I'm sorry for misunderstanding you all this time. I used you as a pretext to avoid facing reality ... but that's enough. I will release you now."

I take a small bottle out of my pocket.

"Here's your birthday present!"

I drizzle the scented oil I wanted to give her that day on the ground. A peppermint fragrance starts to spread.

Finally, my time can move forward again.

Aya-oneechan can't possibly have noticed the peppermint scent, yet a faint smile appears on her face while her eyes remain closed.

I doubt she was content with her life. She must have had a lot of regrets. She must have been full of hate and remorse when she died.

However—

This is just my personal view, but I think that she was also a little bit happy that she had kept her plans to study abroad from me. Because thanks to that—

—She could save her little sister.

"Maria ... all the best to you..."

With those final words, she fell into eternal slumber.

"Goodbye, Onee-chanO."

My long-lasting enemy, O, fades silently into the air and disappears.

The monster within me is no more.

I dive into the sea again. I continue to follow the weeping as I head deeper into the dark. I'm not afraid anymore, even if I can't see what's ahead of me. The deeper I go, the more of my memory returns.

Ah ... they're all memories I don't want to remember, but I will no longer flee from them. I keep going in order to face my past.

When did I start crying here? Probably since the very beginning. Ever since the moment I obtained my box, I must have been weeping because of my loneliness here. My original, weak self was in the way of my plan to become Aya Otonashi; that's why I sunk her in the depths of the sea.

However, until I retrieve my other half, I won't be able to destroy the Flawed Bliss.

Groping in the dark for my crying self, I continue to wander about. The weeping is right beside me, but I can't see anyone. "Maria," I call out and stretch out my hand.

I feel someone with my fingertips.

"Is it you, Maria?"

I grab at her wrist and pull her toward me.

Orbs of light surround us and light up the dark. The weeping girl looks like my 13-year-old self.

"Are you the Zeroth Maria?"

She is the past I've left behind: my former self. My weak self. My distrusting and diffident self.

The Zeroth Maria lifts her head and gives me a mystified look.

(Can you see me now?)

Her words take me by surprise. But she's right ... all this time, I must have been unable to see her.

"Yes! I can see you."

(Will you be with me from now on?)

"I'll be with you forever," I say as I take her hand. "I won't run away from you anymore. I won't run away from my past anymore."

I look into her eyes and give her a gentle smile.

"Please come back to me."

The Zeroth Maria, however, seems hesitant. For good reason: after all, I'm the one who tormented her.

(...You must promise me several things.)

"What do you want me to promise?"

(Cry when you're sad. Laugh when you're happy. Get angry when you don't like something. Depend on someone when you're depressed. Care for yourself before you care for others. Don't hate anyone. Be proud of yourself.)

These are things that used to be impossible for me, but the moment she mentions the last promise, I feel strangely confident that I will have no problems keeping these promises:

(Stay loyal when you fall in love.)

"Yeah, I promise. You can be sure of me."

(Really?)

I nod. I'm absolutely confident that I can keep my word.

(Great! I'll come back then!)

The Zeroth Maria stops crying and laughs instead. She starts to merge with my body.

"Ugh, ah..."

Learning about and accepting the truth doesn't make it any less unpleasant; a nauseating sensation runs through my body that feels like my blood is flowing the wrong way. I'm not strong anymore. I can't even pretend to be. The weaker half I've regained is helpless and has nothing.

My complete past flows back into me and charges at me with sad memories. Even now that I've stopped running away, I still can't get myself to enjoy the world; I've lost count of how many times it made me suffer. There doesn't seem to be a single grain of gentleness in the world.

Reality is harsh, unrewarding, mean, whimsical, unfair, frightening—

But...

I'm not alone anymore.

"Right, Kazuki?"

That's why I can return to being Maria Otonashi.

I emerge from the bottom of the sea and wake up in my former apartment.

O isn't here anymore. Instead, I'm holding a beautiful but fragile, transparent cube in my hands.

And I'm not alone.

"Ah—"

His presence makes me tear up. I cry with relief. I don't want to admit it, but this is my true self.

"Ah ... Kazuki."

Kazuki is lying on the floor. I clasp him in my arms, but he doesn't react. He just stares into space with a vacant look.

Over the course of an excruciating number of loops, Kazuki lost everything. The absolute solitude has taken both wit and memory from him, and turned him into a lifeless shell. Even his soul has been transformed by my gruesome box. I doubt he will ever be the same again.

Reality is as harsh as always. Life keeps imposing new trials upon me.

However, I will not rely on *boxes* anymore.

I try to form the best smile I can as I cry, and start speaking to Kazuki.

"Hey Kazuki ... do you remember that one time when I lost heart in the Rejecting Classroom? You would hold your hand out to me and say, 'I have come to meet thee, m'lady Maria.' And then you would claim that you had come to save me even if it meant the betrayal of all others and their eternal enmity. Your actions have been consistent ever since. You've always tried to save me, while I was held captive at the bottom of the ocean and pretended to be strong. And you kept your word. You really dove into the depths of the endless ocean to save me. You truly betrayed everyone else in search of me, sparing no pains to do so."

I put the transparent box on the floor and gently wrap my hands around Kazuki's. His fingers twitch slightly, but that's probably just a reflex.

"Please forgive me. There is only one thing I can do to repay this debt."

I touch his arm.

"I will stay by your side for the rest of my life."

Kazuki shows no reaction.

"This time I won't give up. I will keep waiting for you to come back. Well, it's nothing compared to how long you had to wait for me, right? But ... that's not quite true. This is not about waiting or not waiting. Destiny has made us inseparable. I will forever stay by your side—it's the only option that exists."

I smile at him.

"Because that's our everyday life."

A tear falls on his palm. I can't deny it: it hurts that he is staring into space and not at me.

"Everything will turn out well that way, right? You said that there's no despair that can't be overcome by everyday life, right?" I say in a shivery voice. "I believe in you. After all, you defeated Aya Otonashi."

Kazuki will return.

But to be honest, the path back seems so endless and difficult that I'm about to despair.

"Do you recognize me?"

"Do you understand me?"

"Do you see me?"

"Do you feel me?"

"Do you remember me?"

None of my questions receive a response.

I have to admit that I'm almost losing heart, but I still try to maintain a smile. There is hope.

"Don't worry. If you forgot me, I will keep calling your name so that you can rediscover me, just like you kept calling mine."

"Kazuki," I say.

"Kazuki," I say with a teary voice.

"Kazuki," I say tenderly.

"Kazuki," I say cheerfully.

"Kazuki."

"Kazuki."

"Kazuki."

I continued to call his name. Before I knew it, the sun had set. During that time, Kazuki didn't just sit there. He stood up and walked around, and even wordlessly touched my face and my body. However, there was no thought behind his movements. Strangely enough, though, not once did he slam against the wall.

"Kazuki."

I must have called his name thousands of times today, but I don't mind in the slightest. Just saying his name makes me happy.

Suddenly, he squats down. Apparently, he noticed the transparent box. He picks it up and stares closely at it, not moving an inch.

"Kazuki...? What's wrong?"

Kazuki clasps the Flawed Bliss with his injured right hand that still has the power to crush boxes – the power of the Empty Box.

Fragile as the transparent box is, it bursts without any resistance.

The Flawed Bliss has been destroyed once and for all, and with it, Kazuki's Empty Box loses its power as well.

It's all over. I'm sure our lives will never get entangled with *boxes* again; Kazuki carried out his will through to the finish and extinguished his enemy.

Kazuki won against the boxes.

He turns his gaze to me. There is no will in his eyes and they don't see me. I'm sure he doesn't even know himself.

However, Kazuki doesn't avert his eyes from me.

I don't know why, but I think I know what he is about to say. He is about to bring about a miracle.

"—Maria."

My name must have stuck in his mouth after he said it so many times.

I mustn't get my hopes up, I say to myself. I mustn't ask for more happiness than this.

However, my heart won't obey. I'm so delighted that I have to sob.

How could you blame me?

After all, I'm no longer Aya Otonashi, the fighter, but Maria Otonashi, the crybaby.



e
p
i
l
o
g
u
e

エピローグ

o
g
u
e

illog

—Do you have a wish?



+++ Kasumi Mogi (19), April 10th +++

My first love probably ended the moment *she* showed up.

Not once have I thought about giving up, but ... ah, sheesh! I know that there is something powerful between her and Hoshino-kun! I've been in love with him long enough to tell.

The sun is shining and the vivid pink of their blossoms is making the sakura trees stand out. Just like every other day, I'm practicing at the archery range that's buried somewhere in this vast rehabilitation center.

My arms have grown quite trained compared to their state before my accident, but I still have trouble just drawing my bow. Since I can barely shoot an arrow in a straight line, let alone aim, I naturally miss my mark.

I let out a faint sigh. As someone who's never been good at sports, I don't think I'm cut out for archery. It's unlikely that I'll make it to the Paralympic Games anytime soon ... although saying so to my physical therapist, Ryouko-sensei, would probably make her cross. "Takanashi-san got a gold medal and he was worse than you in the beginning!" or "Gotou-san won the wheelchair tennis tournament after recovering from attempted suicide." I'm so sick of her stories ... Take heart, young girl! Honest effort will make your dreams come true! Don't give up, give it your all! Sheesh, she's just way too hot-blooded! And strict. She ought to be softer on a handicapped girl like me.

I'm not given any special treatment at this giant hospital. There are plenty of other patients in wheelchairs. In fact, Ryouko-sensei actually seems to envy me for my youth instead of pitying me. I think she might be a bit strange in the head.

"Kasumi-chaaan!"

I raise my head and notice Ishizaki-san, a tennis player, happily waving at me.

I wave back with a slightly wry smile. Usually, I'm trying to avoid making this kind of expression, but my attempts haven't borne fruit so far. I wonder how I should deal with someone who confessed his love to me...?

In order to stop thinking about all this random stuff, I draw my bow again.

Right after my accident, I used to think that the odds were against my finding a partner who would accept me like this. I daresay anyone in a similar situation would think the same thing. But here, at this hospital? I don't mean to brag, but the guys here love me. If it were just other handicapped guys, that would be one thing, but even guys in perfect health are making passes at me—much more frequently than when I was healthy and still in school.

I used to wonder why people would approach such a (physically) bothersome girl like me, but I'm starting to understand their rationale. A lot of people want to be relied upon, so marrying someone like me would basically guarantee a life worth living for that kind of guy. Their interest in me mostly comes from the fact that I would surely have to depend on them.

Maybe I should just accept the people with those weird tastes? To be entirely honest, though, I'm still unable to take their goodwill at face value; I can't help but get the impression that they're only really interested in my disability, and not in me as a person. They seem to be under the (false) impression that my disability gives me some sort of beauty that can't be attained by a regular girl. Or maybe they just want to go out with someone who's weak and has to obey them? I guess I must have a bad personality to have such negative thoughts.

But there's just that thought that I can't shake off.

—Hoshino-kun would treat me the same whether my legs were paralyzed or not.

When that thought crossed my mind, the arrow really went off the reservation.

There were some awful incidents that occurred involving us—much more severe than my accident—but for some reason I don't remember the details. They were mysterious and even absurd.

I do remember them, although only in a fragmented way: the confinement within another world that ended with a clear rejection from Hoshino-kun; the incident caused by Miyazaki-kun; the mysterious death of Koudai Kamiuchi; the Dog Human phenomenon that Oomine-kun caused; and—Hoshino-kun's losing himself.

But important things are missing from my memory. My memory feels like a ripped up piece of celluloid. These incidents are supposed to be linked in some way, but I can't seem to remember how. It's like the truth behind these incidents was obscured by some higher power.

There are other things that bother me; for instance, there's something about Nana Yanagi and Touji Kijima, who entered high school together with Hoshino-kun and were his friends. We got along well, but for no particular reason, it strikes me as odd how naturally they blended in at school. I do remember how we became friends. I also remember how I was annoyed by Nana-san because she always made passes at Hoshino-kun even though she had a boyfriend. But for some reason, these memories feel unreal and stand out—as if they had been made up afterward to fill in the gaps.

I think that I—no, we have forgotten something crucial.

Whatever that is, the consequences that matter for me are clear as day:

Hoshino-kun disappeared from the classroom I wanted to return to one day.

My doctor has always strongly encouraged me to move to a larger, better-equipped rehabilitation hospital. I only refused his suggestion and stayed at the my current hospital because I wanted to return to school and see Hoshino-kun. However, since he was no longer there, my motive was also gone.

As a result, I left my home town.

That being said, there was still a matter that had to be settled.

The day after it was decided that I would move to a rehabilitation center, I called Otonashi-san to the hospital. After getting permission from my nurse, I met her in private on the rooftop. I didn't want to talk with her in my hospital room because I knew that I wouldn't be able to control myself.

As the cold breezes of autumn chilled me to the bone, I gazed at Maria Otonashi who, set in front of the breathtaking autumn colors of the distant mountains, looked almost like an oil painting. Well, she would make for a stunning painting even without the background.

She had cut her hair to shoulder length and lost some of her former mysterious atmosphere, and become slightly more approachable. But I'm pretty sure that wasn't just due to her haircut.

Gazing at the beautiful girl in front of me, I thought, *I'll never get to like her.*

I was fairly sure that Hoshino-kun and I would have become a couple if not for her. She was also to blame for what had become of him. Conversely, if I had been able to properly integrate myself back into his everyday life, Otonashi-san would have stayed away, and Hoshino-kun would still be the same.

I was sure that there would have been a future in which I called him tenderly by his name, "*Kazuki-kun*."

It was all her fault.

Maria Otonashi was the one who brought chaos in our lives.

"I'll leave this town and go to a large rehabilitation center."

Because of her, I had to leave Hoshino-kun behind.

After hearing what I said, Otonashi-san bluntly stated, "I see." After a short pause, she added, "I'll make sure to tell Kazuki."

As I heard his name, my feelings immediately exploded. *Can you even imagine how I feel, having to tell you that?!* I thought to myself, wishing I could hurl my anger, my regrets, and all my other negative emotions at her. I wanted to curse her with words dirtier than any I'd ever used. I wanted to make her apologize for messing up the lives of Hoshino-kun and his friends. I wanted to deal out a resounding slap.

I clenched my fists harder and harder, as if to channel my anger.

At last, I said the words that I had prepared in advance.

"Please take good care of Hoshino-kun."

I bowed deeply before her while biting my lips.

Aah, I don't want to do this. I really don't, I thought, but I had already decided that I would entrust him to this girl even though I hate her.

"I want to support Hoshino-kun ... I want to be by his side and support him! But I still have to rely on others myself, and I'm aware of that. I can't do anything on my own. I'm weak ... I would only become a burden to him...!"

I couldn't raise my head. I was so mortified, so sad, so unwilling to admit defeat; the tears wouldn't stop.

"I'm sure I would have won him over even with a body like this!" I said.

"Mm."

That was a lie. I knew well enough that there was a special bond between the two of them that I could never tear asunder. Even if I were in perfect health, I wouldn't have had a chance. Otonashi-san was also aware of this and just listened silently as I spit out my silly bluffs.

"I love Hoshino-kun, and I would certainly still feel that way even if he remained unable to speak!"

"Mm."

"This is a once in a lifetime love. It means so much to me!"

"...Mm."

"Hoshino-kun also has feelings for me. Right ... I haven't lost! I ... haven't lost. Absolutely not!" I said and bit my lips again. "...But ... but...!"

Hoshino-kun doesn't need me—

"It's not me!"

He doesn't need me, Kasumi Mogi—he needs Maria Otonashi!

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" I cried at the top of my lungs, unable to hold back my pain any longer.

Otonashi-san did not do any unnecessary things like hugging me or wiping away my tears; she just patiently waited for me to calm down.

"Mogi," she said firmly after I stopped crying, "I assure you that Kazuki will regain his normal everyday life."

I turned my teary eyes to Otonashi-san.

"Your feelings for him will without a doubt make a positive difference for Kazuki. They will help him return. It's a future that is bound to come about. So let me say this in advance:"

Maria Otonashi bowed deeply to me.

"Thank you for believing in Kazuki."

Her attitude took the wind out of my sails. In fact, a laugh escaped my lips.

"I can't match you at all, can I?"

Right, I can't keep up with her.

I mean, Otonashi-san believed with all her heart that Kazuki-kun was going to recover despite his current state. I, on the other hand, would love him even if he remained unresponsive. That's truly how I feel, and proof of my weakness.

After all, it means that I've given up on his return.

Maria Otonashi, however, did not have any doubts. She believed in and waited for his return.

That's why she is the one who should be by Hoshino-kun's side.

A load had just been taken off my mind, leaving me with a hard-to-describe sense of freedom. At first I was surprised by how I felt, and then I was disheartened; I hadn't realized it, but the love that had once saved me, had become a burden instead.

"Aah—"

My first love had ended.

—Will I fall in love again?

—Will I ever be relied on by anyone again?

—Will I be able to find a special place for myself?

While I'm mired in melancholy, somebody scatters a handful of sakura blossoms over my head. I turn around in surprise.

"Hey, is our idol doing okay?"

I sigh deeply upon hearing that silly title, and put down my bow.

This sun-tanned woman who doesn't wear any makeup and looks horrible in her white gown, is my physical therapist.

"...Don't call me that, Ryouko-sensei."

Seeing my discontented face, she grins and says, "Sorry, but we can't call you anything else anymore!"

"Why...?"

"Because you just got another interview request! And this time's it's from that super famous TV channel that broadcasts 24/7! Of course, you'll accept, right?"

Her voice is as loud as ever.

"...I don't want to! Please refuse the offer."

"What, again? Hey ... wanna hear my private thoughts on this?"

"Go ahead..."

"I think you should take this chance!" she says and holds out a finger. "If you appear on TV, people throughout Japan will be moved by your smile! You have the wonderful gift of not looking pitiful *at all* despite your situation. You could really change how people view the disabled! If you keep appearing on TV, their acceptance of the disabled will grow rapidly! Peeps from the mass media have a nose for this sort of thing, and they want you."

You should totally start to sing, dance, arrange handshake events, and be voted the most popular member of your prospective girl group! That would be a revolution! The patients here and we PT's would love to be more accepted by everyone, and you're the only one who can do this! It's your calling!"

"...I've heard this more than enough," I say as I rebuff her.

"Hm? Come again?"

"I said that I've heard the same thing over and over again. Your private thoughts? Sheesh, there's nothing private about them, is there?"

But Ryouko-sensei really believes in me.

"...But..."

Thank you.

I couldn't express my gratitude out loud.

She's clearly exaggerating; I doubt things would go so smoothly, but to my surprise, it's true that even in my current state, I have the chance to make the world a better place. This gives me hope.

There are a lot of things that I can no longer do. That's just the way it is. But at the same time, there might also be things that only I can do. Not something flashy like becoming an idol, but something small—something modest.

"...I'll give it some thought when I've got some more inner reserves."

But right now, I've still got my hands full coping with my own situation.

"Hmm? Got you interested a little? I'll wait for your answer, then."

"Ugh ... no, really, I'm not interested right now..."

I know Ryouko-sensei: If I don't make it absolutely clear that I'm refusing, I'll find myself getting dragged on stage before I know it.

"Seriously, I'm not prepared for it right now!"

"Hm? Not prepared for what, exactly?"

"Well, I mean ... if get famous on TV, I'll be bothered with even more admirers and stuff..."

The moment I said that, I realize that I just made a mistake. I glance at Ryouko-sensei and notice that her face is twitching with irritation.

"It pisses me off that you mean it. Just a warning for you, little girl, once you're out of your teens, you won't be so special anymore! Japanese men are all lolicons!"

"Um ... I'm sure there are also men who like your type."

"You should get off your high horse when you say things like that and sound more sincere!"

Well ... I really doubt that women like her are very...

"Look at those eyes of yours! You're totally thinking something rude! So insolent! Yes, yes, I understand! You want some really harsh rehab training today!"

"Stop! Don't be childish, Ryouko-sensei!"

"Idols don't complain."

"But they do! Their secret Twitter accounts are *packed* with complaints about their fans!"

"Now that's a very specific example ... by the way, you just admitted that you're an idol."

"I didn't!"

Well then. This is roughly what my life is like right now, Hoshino-kun. As you can tell, I'm doing just fine.

I'm sure Otonashi-san is also with you right now. I heard she made quite a stunning announcement during her speech when she became the president of the student council?

On one hand, I'm looking forward to that day, but on the other hand, I'm mostly jealous.

One year to go until the day of Otonashi-san's promise.

Until then, I want to grow up a bit—become independent and strong enough to support someone else. Hopefully, you won't be disappointed by my progress.

This is my modest *wish*.

+++ Yuuri Yanagi (19), July 6th +++

I need a hobby.

That's the first thing that I thought when I was accepted by the University of Tokyo. *Let's join a club, Yuuri!* I told myself and went to check out a few. The one that interested me the most was the photography club. There was an adorable picture in the club room that showed a child smiling under the blue sky. It had me thinking that there must be many more beautiful things in the world, and that I wanted to discover them. I wanted to record and preserve the beauty of things that I deemed beautiful.

I had my parents buy me a slightly expensive SLR camera to celebrate my college admission and joined the photography club. It turned out that the club was almost all guys, but everyone was kind to me. I just had to say what kind of photograph I wanted to take, and they would explain the technical details to me in-depth. They would even lend me their expensive lenses when I needed them. For some reason, they always wanted to show me the darkroom even though I had a digital camera, but anyway, I was really welcomed with open arms despite being a beginner.

I also made a slightly embarrassing discovery when I entered university. It seems that girlish, frilly clothing—the style that I'm fond of—is not common among the female students and makes me stand out a little. But I think it's boring when everyone wears the same kind of clothes, and I can't warm up to those brown, soft perm hairdos. I want to keep my long black hair with straight bangs, and I won't stop wearing skirts. I also like my ribbons and lately, I've taken a liking to knee socks.

I'm now known by the following nickname:

"Geek Princess"

"I want to cry."

I'm sitting in a Starbucks near the university, whining to a friend of mine.

"Well ... Geek Princess isn't *that* bad, is it now? I mean, a princess is still a princess."

That old friend of mine is Iroha Shindou. She fails at comforting me and is busy chewing on an ice cube from her iced coffee. She also attends my university.

A faint shadow can be seen in her eyes—she doesn't have that sharp, predatory look anymore. Her mental scars have not completely healed. Even now, one year after that incident, she is still seeing a psychiatrist. She likes to refer to it as "taking a break from life." That being said, I'm quite sure that she would have needed a break sooner or later anyway; it was high time that she slowed down a bit.

That being said, I'm not really worried about her. After all, she's a prodigy who managed to pass the hardest science exam straight out of high school—while on that "break"—and entered the faculty of medicine. She completely wiped the floor with the other students.

"Speaking of which, Yuuri ... weren't you with a bunch of guys when we met up earlier?"

"The other members of my club escorted me because it's too dangerous for me to be alone."

"At night, sure, but in broad daylight...? Sigh, you have no right to whine about your nickname, then."

But I didn't ask them to ... besides, I've learned that turning them down would only make matters worse...

"That's not it. I'm not whining about being called a Geek Princess~. I was against the name in the beginning, but I've grown used to it."

"So you have other issues?"

"Yep. To tell you the truth, a senior at school confessed his love to me. He's really popular with the other girls in school, you know? But I never really saw him that way..."

"Oh boy! So you had to turn him down, right?" Iroha says. "Well, I can totally see that it'd be hard to say 'no' to someone. So that's why you want to cry?"

"No, I accepted."

"You did what?!" exclaims Iroha as she pounds on the table and stands up. Urm, Iroha? You're attracting attention. Aren't you over-reacting a bit? It's embarrassing.

"Wait, Iroha, you have to hear me out. Look, I ... still can't forget, well, *him*, even though I want to ... so I thought I might be able to move on if I went out with someone else..."

"...Okay, I see," Iroha nods with a sour face. She still hasn't come to terms with Kazuki-san, who cornered her but also made her to return to the proper path.

"But I wasn't able to forget him, and I didn't fall in love with my senior, either. In the end, we split up after just two weeks, so ... I'm sorry...."

"Hm ... I do know where you're coming from, but that guy sure deserves my compassion. Well, it's still your fault, so I can understand how you'd feel guilty. I'd wanna cry, too, in your place."

"Ah, I'm totally fine with the breakup."

"You're fine?!" *Thump!* She pounds on the table again.

You're embarrassing me ... the baristas are watching.

"The story doesn't end here. One of the only other girls in the club had a crush on that boy and started to avoid me ... I can really get that. I don't think she was happy when I snatched away her crush only to dump him a few days later."

"Weeell ... that figures."

"But then again, she's one of my few fellow girls in the club, you know? So I tried to make it up to her somehow."

"How so?"

"I thought she might forgive me if she got a boyfriend herself, and I knew of another guy she was interested in. I thought that everything would turn out fine if I hooked them up, so I tried putting them in contact with each other."

"Uh-huh ... I'm not a fan of this sort of thing, but I guess that's a reasonable solution," Iroha comments.

"Yes. So I tried getting them into situations where they could talk in private, setting them up on dates, and so on. The girl noticed what I was up to and slowly started to forgive me, but then..."

"Trouble?"

"Yes. Um ... the guy got angry with me. 'Is this some bad joke? Why are you trying to hook me up with her?' he yelled at me. I was really scared..."

"Why would he get angry with you?"

"Apparently, he was in love with *me*..."

"You're a monster! Well ... I guess you didn't know, so nobody's at fault here."

"Oh, I knew about his feelings for me."

"You fucking knew?!" *Thump!* She pounds on the table again.

Even the customers on the terrace have started watching us...!

"No, I mean ... I'm sorry. But hey, I had just ended a relationship myself, you know? I had other things to worry about. Ah, but how could he have known about my situation, right? ...I'm horrible..."

"Hm ... your behavior wasn't entirely inappropriate if you didn't even think about responding to him, I suppose? No ... but you're definitely at fault here, Yuuri."

"Yes ... I know. Anyway, that person then immediately asked me to go out with him. I tried to calm him down and explain to him that I didn't want to, but ... he's the obstinate kind of person who always gets what he wants ... so he gradually lost his patience when I kept turning him down, until, one day—"

"O-One day...?"

"He attacked me."

Iroha's eyes widen in shock. "He attacked you...? I mean, literally?"

"Yes ... Ah! Don't worry! I cried for help and got away unharmed! Your Yuuri's still pure!"

"Well, setting aside the question whether or not you're pure, Yuuri..." *That's mean! I'm still 100% virgin!* "You reap what you sow, but nobody deserves that, of course. Yeah, you've got my sympathy. You may cry."

"No, that's not it..."

"That's not it, either?! Come on, cry already! You deserve it!"

Why?!

"Please, hear me out! So, the professor who atta—"

"PROFESSOR!" Iroha yells with another thump on the table and stands up.

"Professor! Hey, you skipped that part! A professor! A freaking *professor*...!" She continues pounding on the table.

"I-Iroha! Stop making such a fuss...!"

All people in here are watching us ... I'm so embarrassed...

"Umm ... look, I'm sure you've read our bulletin boards, right?" I explain.

"There was a notice about a disciplinary action taken against a professor. There were also news reports on the incident!"

"That was your doing?!"

"I-I'm not at fault! I'm the victim!"

"Well, that's true, but..." With a deep sigh Iroha sits down again and starts sipping on her now-watery iced coffee. "And?"

Oh, she looks really tired.

"So the incident got quite famous because a professor was involved, right? Of course, rumors started floating around that I was a slut who seduced a professor, or that I was a bitch who's taking advantage of the guys in her club. It's horrible, Iroha! Those are groundless accusations!"

"I wouldn't call them 'groundless,' though."

"Y-Yes, they are. Anyway ... the atmosphere in the club is still strained and that girl I mentioned left because she hates me ... but even when I tried to take responsibility and leave the club, the other members held me back. I'm at my wit's end..."

"You're not a Geek Princess—you're just a club destroyer," she says as she coldly dismisses "But I got it now. Anyone would want to cry in your shoes."

"..."

"Yuuri...?"

"...Don't think ill of me, okay?"

"Sorry, but I think I've heard enough today to think *very* ill of you."

"No way!"

"It's entirely justified! Sigh ... so? In the end, what was it that makes you wanna cry?"

"Well ... as you can tell, I've acquired a lot of influence. There are several students who I could not only drive out of their clubs, but even out of school entirely."

"What of it...?"

I pluck up my courage and say it:

"It feels great."

"Huh?"

"This feeling of having total control over other people's lives feels great. A few lies here, a few sweet words there, and I can easily crush the elite who made it to such a renowned university. Just thinking about what would happen if I actually did it gets me all excited and tingly."

I hold my head.

"My personality makes me want to cry!"

Iroha throws her cup at me. I deserved it, didn't I? Tee-hee!

After saying goodbye to Iroha, I take my SLR camera and visit a spacious park to take some photos of the setting sun. A strong summery smell of grass fills the area and the cries of the cicadas seem to be shaking the air.

My horizons have expanded greatly since high school; I've started going to college, living on my own and even got myself a moped.

I'm slowly starting to understand myself better.

Back in high school, I aimed for the top without any specific goals in mind, but there were always students that outperformed me. I sensed an insurmountable barrier between us that left me in despair. I was horribly jealous of and felt inferior to Iroha, the prime example of a student who I couldn't match.

Iroha is a born revolutionary; she is never satisfied with the status quo. She is always trying to push herself and the world further. The unusual reason for her entrance into the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tokyo is that she wants to begin by changing the world via medicine. She does possess the intelligence and skill required to earnestly pursue her goals.

Today, I understand that there was no way I could have beaten someone as driven as Iroha through aimless studying. Iroha has settled down a bit because of the setback she suffered, but once she's done with her break, she will definitely continue to work toward revolutionizing the world.

There's a fundamental difference between me and Iroha. I can't become like her, nor do I want to. I don't care as much about the world. I'm happy if my family and I can have a good life. Because of this, I will never hold a candle to Iroha.

That being said, I've come to terms with it.

Iroha and I have different desires. Now that she promoted (demoted?) me to a "club destroyer," I discovered my true desire.

I want to manipulate others. I want to control them like puppets.

Why, yes, it's a twisted desire. At the very least, I can't call it beautiful. But it seems like I'm rather skilled at controlling others, and I can use this skill to be of use to society.

There is a certain PR company that once employed a radical strategy with 10 principles.

1. Manipulate people to consume more
2. Manipulate people to discard more readily
3. Manipulate people to waste money
4. Manipulate people to disregard seasonality
5. Manipulate people to buy more presents
6. Manipulate people to buy products in bundles
7. Manipulate people to seize every opportunity to buy
8. Manipulate people to chase after trends
9. Manipulate people to readily buy products
10. Manipulate people to be in constant turmoil

When I read that list, I thought, *this is it*.

It means that I can boost the economy and help society if I make full use of my abilities and give full scope to my desires. There is a place for people like me.

I'm an agitator to the core. I want to watch the brainless masses dance to my tune.

My life has become a lot easier after discovering my path. I know where I have to go and don't have to waste any time and energy. I have also started to work toward finding a job in a PR company or in the mass media.

If I succeed as an agitator, I might even be able to tag along with Iroha's revolution. Should that ever happen, we will finally be on an equal footing and I could take part in changing the world. I would certainly have no inferiority complex with respect to her anymore.

However—

"I don't need to become *that* successful."

I'm content if I'm able to drive just one person to love me, and then build a happy family. That's all I want.

"Kazuki-san..."

That person won't be my first love, though.

"Hah..."

A smile escapes my lips as I sigh.

Kazuki-san belongs to Maria Otonashi and her alone, but for some reason, I feel that it's also better that way. I have the hunch that my feelings for him were not meant to be requited.

I couldn't help laughing when I heard about the announcement Otonashi-san made after Iroha and I had graduated. Kazuki-san, you hooked yourself quite a big fish! My sympathies!

But I'm sure you need her power right now.

"Ah."

The setting sun is starting to dye the sky a nice color. Those reflections in the water are exactly what I was looking for. I decide to focus on a couple that are rowing a boat and take a photo. After a few shots from different angles and with different exposure times, I eventually manage to take a good one.

"Mm!"

Even I can take beautiful photographs, and I will be able to take many more.

There's still just over two years until the day of Otonashi-san's promise.

I want to get a bit closer to my dream before then. I want to become confident in myself.

...If possible, I'd also like to find myself someone who's even more handsome than you, Kazuki-san!

Yes, that would be my *wish*.

+++ Haruaki Usui (19), August 14th +++

Until that turning point, my heart was veiled in complete darkness.

My decision to give up my dream of becoming a professional baseball player in favor of going to the same high school as Daiya Oomine and Kokone Kirino resulted in the worst outcome possible. Daiya got above himself and was stabbed, Kiri suffered a horrible shock that she's unlikely to ever get over, and Hoshii can't even talk anymore. I've lost all of my best friends.

My everyday life had been completely devastated.

During those days, I became completely withdrawn. I saw everything through a horrible fog and nothing seemed meaningful. I somehow managed to force myself to attend my classes, but there was hardly any point in doing so; all I did was keep moving like a brainless bug. There were times when I would go home without saying a single word all day.

Time passed like this and Iroha Shindou's class graduated, Kiri quit school, Hoshii's parents registered him as absent for an indefinite period of time, and Kasumi moved away. By the time I was a third-year student, I was all alone. My memory of that time is rather vague.

However, the darkness that smothered me was cleared away by Maria Otonashi's words.

On July 15th, Maria Otonashi was elected student council president. I had become a third-year student and 9 months had passed since everyone went away.

There was an assembly for all the students in the gym—the student council was passing the torch to the next generation. In distinct contrast to any other assembly, the students were waiting for the ceremony to start with bated breath, their gazes fixed on the stage.

Of course they weren't looking at the unremarkable, outgoing president. Their full attention was directed at the new president, Maria Otonashi.

She had visited me in my classroom from time to time to see how I was doing, but I always ignored her. I knew that she wasn't at fault, but I still could not bring myself to get on friendly terms with her again.

I must have subconsciously felt that she, the outsider, was the one who had wreaked havoc on our lives.

The Maria Otonashi that I saw standing on the platform had lost much of her former mystique. Her charisma, on the other hand, was clearly untouched: she had won the election in a landslide, which was part of the reason she was in the spotlight. On top of that, nobody had forgotten how she parted the masses like Moses parted the Red Sea and marched up to Hoshii during the entrance ceremony.

The situation was similar, so everyone was secretly expecting something unusual to happen.

Maria Otonashi started her inaugural speech by speaking in a clear and distinct manner. She managed to reach the hearts of her audience.

For quite some time a strange air of anxiety had been gripping the entire school; a queer air of anxiety which everyone seemed to be aware of. Various bizarre incidents certainly played a role in this (like the murder incident or the emergence of Dog Humans), but we also couldn't shake off the feeling that something far graver had directly affected us—because there was something amiss with our memories.

We had been placed under and then released from someone's control.

It's hard to explain because there was no concrete reason for this feeling, but it kept following us like a curse. Everyone could sense the oppressive, strained air that filled the school. There was a silent agreement to never speak of it; the mere mention of the subject was a taboo because nobody wanted to talk about it.

However, Maria Otonashi shattered that silence in her speech. She described the feeling clearly and directly while explaining it to us, and even proposed a few different methods for getting rid of it. Her speech managed to be both practical and theoretical.

It was exactly what the students had longed for. They listened carefully to her speech with bated breath and made sure not to miss a single word.

Wow, she's one impressive girl, I said to myself. *But that won't bring my friends back,* I then thought. Therefore, her brilliant speech didn't leave a lasting impression on me.

"—I will do my best to make sure that the students of this school can once again enjoy a fruitful school life. I'm Maria Otonashi, the new president of the student council."

The audience started to applaud, thinking that the speech was over, but she lifted her hand and signaled for them to hold off.

"Lastly, I'd like to make an announcement."

With an abrupt change of tone and expression, she continued:

"Kazuki Hoshino and I will get married when he has reached the age of 20."

"...What?" I uttered, confused by her sudden and seemingly random remark.

Everyone present, including the teachers, was completely baffled.

"We will get married and become happy. Happier than anyone else."

However, in contrast to her words, she was crying.

Almost everyone knew about Hoshii's current state. It was also well known that Maria Otonashi was his girlfriend and cared for him every day.

"It's all for the sake of *my own* happiness!"

Had she been moved to tears? No. Her announcement was in no way selfish, as one could easily recognize by looking at her pained expression.

In that case—

My gut feeling told me what it was.

It was—an apology to all of us.

For some reason, Maria Otonashi felt responsible for the strange atmosphere permeating the school. She was desperately apologizing to us. She was desperately trying to atone for her sins.

Hoshii must have been the one who had suffered the most because of that strange atmosphere, and therefore his everyday life was the most difficult to restore. In order to get married and become happy, it was a natural requirement for him to return to normal first.

In other words, Maria Otonashi had just announced that she would fight to restore even the most damaged everyday life.

If she succeeded, she would also release us from this disturbing feeling.

She had deemed this to be the best way for her to atone. That's why she would succeed no matter what.

I'm sure the majority of the audience wasn't able to grasp the more nuanced elements of her announcement, but looking at her face and hearing her voice was enough to convey the true message—which was not selfish at all.

—Our everyday lives will return.

With tightly clenched fists and tears in her eyes, Maria Otonashi bowed deeply before everyone, and the audience broke into rapturous applause.

That was the turning point for me.

As the applause continued, the veil that had covered me was lifted in an instant. My chest warmed up and this warmth set my frozen heart back into motion.

Thump! Thump! I hadn't heard my heartbeat so clearly in a long time.

Ah, I see...

I, too, wanted to be forgiven. All this time I'd been unable to forgive myself for failing my friends in their hour of need. That was the most prominent reason for the dark veil over my heart.

I realized that I also had to find a way to atone—that I wouldn't be able to move on until I forgave myself.

I was determined to discover how to atone properly.

Maria Otonashi may have dealt with the oppressive atmosphere at school, but none of my friends came back while I was in high school. But while I was still alone, I stopped spending all my time like a zombie.

Striving to atone, I put the utmost effort into everything I did. I wanted to make the best of my remaining time, even if nothing came of it. As a by-product of my new resolve and as the ace of our team, I drove our second-tier baseball team to runner-up status at the local baseball tournament that summer.

After graduating from high school, I entered university. I chose Waseda University; my grades were not even close to good enough, but I miraculously received a recommendation from their baseball team, most likely because of my performance at the summer tournament.

But while I was ultimately accepted, I'm clearly one of the inferior members of the baseball team. The other members, who have trained and built up their bodies at the powerhouse high schools, easily surpass me in raw power. As a result, I cannot even properly keep up with practices. I'm so bad, actually, that our supervisor subtly suggested that I become the manager of our team. Judging by skill alone, I might end my four years here without playing in an official match even once.

But I'm fine with that. I'm going to devote my four years at university to baseball, even if I'm not successful.

"Usui! Use your damn lower body when you're throwing!" our coach, Miyashiro, suddenly yells while I'm practicing in the bullpen. He's the kind of guy you'd expect to find at a horse race, not in a ballpark, so you wouldn't recognize him as a coach if not for his uniform. He's the only one here who has some positive expectations of me.

"...Coach, may I ask you a question?"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Why did you nominate me for a recommendation? I mean, there were plenty of better players for you to choose from."

"Who told you I nominated you? Well, it doesn't matter. Why did I pick you, you ask? I'm not gonna tell you if you just want some solace for your shitty playing!" he replies.

"No, I just want to know what you think my strengths are. If possible, I'd like to work on improving them."

"Mhm ... Well, guess it's okay then," he says as he scratches his head. "Well, your throws are pretty good for a guy with your wimpy build. I'm gonna say that you've got some potential there."

"But because of my wimpy build, I have trouble keeping up during practices."

"Quite big on the self-critique, eh? But you don't look depressed at all. Hmph ... that's the other reason. Your eyes."

"My eyes? Because they're brimming with enthusiasm?"

"Dead wrong. Even if that was it, you can find players with enthusiasm under every rock. Actually, I can't see a trace of ambition in your eyes, even though that's something almost every professional oughta have. Heck, you don't even look like you're dead set on baseball. You're shit."

"Shit...?"

"But," he adds while scratching his beard stubble, "you have the eyes of someone who knows despair."

I turn silent.

"That keeps you from losing heart with every last setback, and you don't get antsy during tournaments. It actually showed during the selection process, remember? There were better players all around you, but you didn't give a shit."

It's true that I no longer pay attention to other people's skills. It doesn't matter; at the end of the day, you can only do your best.

"I know a guy with similar eyes. He was a pitcher but had to quit because he screwed up his shoulder in a match at Koushien Stadium^[1]. He broke down so bad that I was scared he'd commit suicide at any moment, so I persuaded him to join our baseball team here. That guy, he'd practice everyday to the point of passing out, but once he was batting in a match, I swear he'd hit those balls like a madman. His swings were so mighty strong that I once asked him about his secret. Whaddya think he said?"

Coach Miyashiro grins.

"'Because I won't die if I miss.'"

He sighs deeply.

"How do you feel about that? I honestly don't get it, but my gut feeling tells me that you've got a hunch, no?"

"...How is that person doing now?"

"Lemme think, how many hundreds of millions of yen a year was it again?"

I see. He has a high opinion of me because he recognizes that player in me, not because of my own skill. But I won't lose heart because of that.

I squat down and pick up my ball.

"That player simply had talent," I remark.

"I guess so. 'Thought you might also prove capable, that's all there is to it. Dunno if you've actually got any talent. You disappointed?"

I lay my gloved fingers on the seams of the ball.

"Coach ... There's one guy that I couldn't match my entire life."

"Hm? He must be quite a beast if you say that. I mean, you don't even think of yourself as inferior to Yoshino, do you?"

Yoshino is a pitcher who rejected becoming a professional to join our club and play university baseball.

"A professional? What's his name?"

I answer:

"Daiya Oomine."

"...Never heard of that guy."

"That doesn't surprise me. But he's always been my model."

After calming down my breathing, I wind up my arm and stomp down with my left leg. A strong impulse shoots through my body, straight up to the

fingertips of my right hand. My muscles vibrate as my body takes care of the rest; my arm makes a powerful downward swing.

A swift sound echoes through the bullpen as my pitch cuts through the air.

"Oh, way to give your pitch some spin! Now we're talking!"

Ever since Maria Otonashi's announcement, I've been giving it my all. I've kept running straight ahead without even knowing where I was headed.

I've started seeing results. I'm finally starting to understand what I was lacking.

Why was I unable to be of any help?

—Because I lacked the "determination."

I always watched from the outside and avoided becoming directly involved. I also avoided meddling too deeply in Daiyan and Kiri's affairs. I believed that that was the right distance to maintain to avoid hurting anyone. I was under the impression that I might destroy everything if I didn't keep a certain distance.

Well, it's entirely possible that my concerns were well-founded, but it didn't matter! I might just as well have destroyed everything!

I might just as well have taken Kokone Kirino from Daiya Oomine.

You can't cause a change without some courage and determination. Failing to realize this when it counted is my failure.

Daiya Oomine—he always had that determination. I can't say he was correct in disregarding his own happiness, but he had the determination to follow through on his decisions. There is a lot that I can learn from him.

Ever since we first met, I haven't been able to surpass him.

"Because I won't die if I miss."

I can totally understand the words of that slugger. We won't die just because our dreams and efforts prove futile, nor do we need to despair. We both faced much greater despair, so we aren't afraid of the obstacles that lie before us. We can easily bet on a coin flip while others are too frightened to even pick heads or tails.

Daiyan. I finally found out how I can equal you. But unlike you, I won't sacrifice myself. I'll find my own kind of determination.

Only when I've found the answer to that question will I be able to forgive myself for my inaction.

There's a little more than one year left until Maria Otonashi's promised day. Until then I will definitely find my own kind of determination. That moment will be the point at which my *wish* comes true.



+++ Kokone Kirino (16), September 23rd +++

When Daiya finally showed up at the hospital where I was recovering from my self-inflicted injury, he had already left school. He had removed his piercings and dyed his hair back to its natural black. When he discovered me on my hospital bed, he gave me a tender smile and stroked my cheek.

However, I couldn't see the loving, carefree boy he once was anymore. Daiya was no longer innocent.

I carefully wrapped my hands around his hand. *Mm ... I don't want to forget this touch.*

When I let go of his hand, he pulled it back. That was enough for me to understand what he was planning to do.

"You're going to leave me alone again."

With rounded eyes, Daiya gave me a lopsided smile. "Can't hide anything from you, Kokone, can I?"

"Where do you plan on going this time?"

Daiya smiled vaguely. "I don't know."

"You don't know...?"

"I know what's important to me now: being by your side. Kazu taught me the hard way."

"Then stay here with me, silly..."

He gently shook his head.

"...I'm sure you understand, Kokone. I've committed too many sins. I played with and ruined the futures of a lot of people. As long as I don't atone for this, I can't be by your side. But I don't know how to atone. That's why I have to go look for a way to take responsibility," Daiya explained and calmly lowered his gaze. "I will keep searching. Maybe it'll take a year, maybe it'll take ten, and maybe I won't find out at all. At any rate, I will have to carry this burden for the rest of my life."

"Daiya..."

"But I can promise you one thing."

He kissed me.

"I will return to you, Kokone."

When our lips parted, I couldn't help but tear up.

"Promise!" I said.

"Yeah."

"You must return to me!"

"Yeah."

Daiya wiped away my tears with his fingers.

"I won't fail you again."

He said he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

He promised he would return to me.

But the next time I saw Daiya, he was lying on a hospital bed and had countless medical devices connected to his body.

He had been stabbed in the back by a fanatical middle school girl (who was immediately arrested) and ended up in the ICU. While he escaped death, severe blood loss had caused brain damage and shut down his consciousness.

Daiya was unconscious. A ventilator was pumping air into his lungs through his windpipe, and two tubes had been plugged into his nose. I could hear the sound of the ventilator inflating and deflating and the beeping of the ECG.

The moment I saw him like that, I burst into tears. Even if his chest went up and down and his eyes occasionally blinked, he didn't look human to me anymore. It was a living being disguised as Daiya.

One month passed but he remained comatose.

Daiya's parents visited him almost every day, even though they had not been on speaking terms with him because of the incident involving me and Miyuki Karino. A lot of other people showed up as well: Haru, Kasumi, our other classmates, Maria Otonashi, Yuuri Yanagi, Iroha Shindou, Miyuki Karino, and even Riko Asami, who had been working at a farm in Hokkaidou. Some of his former believers also visited him, but unlike the girl who had stabbed him, they had returned to normal. However, no matter

who visited him, Daiya's condition didn't change. He didn't show any reaction.

Against our families' wishes, I quit school to spend more time by Daiya's side. I believed that letting him listen to my voice was the best way to bring him back.

However, Daiya didn't recover no matter how long I talked to him. While watching him all day I noticed that there were moments when he showed some signs of life, but those were just weak signs and nothing tangible. The crucial bit didn't change; he was still just an inhuman shell.

As time passed, his chances of recovery gradually sunk and my fear that he might never awaken grew by the day. Anxiety gnawed on my hope like a hungry beast.

I slowly started to grow numb ... until I became completely expressionless.

Another month passed and now it was November. I had gotten so haggard that even I was aware of it. In fact, Daiya's doctor even suggested that I talk to a psychiatrist.

I wiped Daiya's tears with a strip of gauze. Of course, those tears just ran down his cheeks due to reflexes and had nothing to do with actual emotions. Suddenly, while I was wiping his face clean, a thought crossed my mind.

Could it be that this is how he plans to atone? Did he impose this punishment on himself to make up for his sins?

If that's true, he's an egotist, I thought. He's neglecting me.

I held my lower body and touched the scar that is likely to accompany me for the rest of my life. It was the place where I stabbed myself with a knife because I believed I could save Daiya.

"I don't care if I die as long as Daiya becomes happy."

Back then, I thought that from the bottom of my heart. And I still do. I'm willing to sacrifice myself for Daiya anytime.

Maybe he was a sinner. Maybe he had to shoulder his sins. But was there a reason for him to carry this burden on his own? Couldn't he pass some of it on to other people like me? Was there nothing he could do to be forgiven?

Is that so? Is that why he ended up like this?

Yeah... I thought to myself. The world had always been cruel, and I knew it. That cruelty was carved into my back.

In that case—

"Enough."

We've seen enough of this world.

By pulling out the medical equipment attached to Daiya, I could stop his bodily functions. *Let's do this*, I thought. *Let's go to the next stage. Maybe his soul is already waiting for me in heaven.*

In that case, just do it!

I grabbed the tubes connected to his nose.

Just pull them out and it's over. No one's gonna blame me. No, even if they do, I'll follow Daiya anyway.

...You were lonely, Daiya, weren't you? I'm sorry, but I'll be with you in a moment!

"Uh ... gh..."

However, I couldn't bring myself to pull them out, and let go of the tubes.

No matter how inhuman the shell before me seemed, it still looked like Daiya. There was no way I could end his life while there was still a chance for him to awaken, no matter how long the odds.

I knew that I was simply prolonging the state of affairs because I was afraid of the endgame, but I couldn't help it.

I'm so weak.

There's nothing I can do.

I broke down on Daiya's emaciated body and cried myself to exhaustion.

Two months passed and the new year came and went, but Daiya still showed no signs of recovery. He did resume breathing on his own from time to time, but I'd been told that it had little to do regaining consciousness. Daiya's doctor had been pessimistic regarding Daiya's recovery from the beginning, but he'd gotten especially frank recently. Daiya's parents still believed that he'd return, but they'd also started showing doubts. They even asked me if we should grant him a painless death.

Isn't it strange? I thought. They made it sound as if Daiya's body were only being kept alive because of my selfishness. Even though I was the one who most wanted to release him!

"I would do anything for you."

That wasn't a lie, but my attempt to commit suicide together had failed. I didn't know if it was right to end his life with my own hands. No, even if it were right, I wouldn't be able to do it.

But there was something I'd noticed.

While I couldn't bring myself to end Daiya's life, I could easily end my own.

I'm sure Daiya's waiting on me in heaven, and if he's not there, it simply means that he survived, which is even better.

What a brilliant idea! I wonder why I didn't think of it earlier?

The next day, I brought a knife with me to visit him.

This time, I wouldn't stab my stomach; I'd cut my throat and go meet Daiya.

My suicidal plans caused one thing to completely slip my mind. Maria Otonashi had said that she'd come by to visit Daiya that day.

She's the one who kept Daiya's body alive by providing first aid and calling the ambulance when he was stabbed. She seems to have forgotten about that, but the records don't lie.

I was thankful for that. But for some reason, I didn't get along with her as well as I used to.

Maria Otonashi had brought a music box and was holding it near Daiya's ears. Apparently, there was a case where a music box brought a patient back to consciousness. *Well, it's futile anyway*, I thought because I doubted that he'd react to something like that if he didn't even react to my voice.

Just leave already so that I can die.

"...Kirino."

All of a sudden, Maria Otonashi gave me a tight hug.

"Huh?"

Did I look that depressed?

...No, she didn't give me a hug—she's examining my pocket.

"Ah..."

She pulled my knife out by its leather cover and sighed deeply as she looked at it.

"I was wondering why you were so antsy, but I sure didn't expect this ... What were you going to—No, don't say it. I can guess."

Her all-knowing attitude made me instantly boil over.

—As if you could understand how I'm feeling!

"Give it back!" I yelled hysterically. "Give it back, give it back, give it back!"

I knew that this much noise would bring the nurses here at any moment, but I was unable to regain my composure and charged at Maria.

My attack proved futile. She swiftly dashed around me and restrained me with a joint lock.

"Cut it out! Let go of me! Give my knife back!" I shouted and, unable to suppress the riot of emotion, continued amid my tears: "The only way! The only way to see Daiya is death!"

"Jesus Christ! Why are you like that, the both of you?!"

"What?!" I yelled back.

"I do respect your and Oomine's determination, but sacrificing yourself for each other is just plain wrong. It makes no sense. It will only make you both unhappy, because Daiya's just as concerned about your happiness as you are about his. Have you forgotten how much you suffered when your positions were reversed?! Why can't you wrap your head around this, for crying out loud!"

Her compelling tone made me flinch, but I continued anyway:

"You're one to talk! Who's sacrificing herself for Kazu-kun right now, hm?!"

"I used to be a manifestation of self-sacrifice, but what's past is past. I'm with Kazuki for my own sake. Kazuki, too, needs me and can't become happy without me. I'm not sacrificing myself anymore, nor could I," she retorted.

I kept scowling at her.

"Do you know why you are making the mistake of sacrificing yourself?" she asked. "I was like you once, that's why I can tell." She then coldly declared:

"It's because you're weak. It's because you can't face reality."

"O-Of course I can't face reality! How could I live with the fact that Daiya—the person I love is a goddamn vegetable?! He's my everything! The world has taken everything from me! What else is there left for me to do?!" I shouted: "What the hell am I supposed to do?!"

I thought she wouldn't be able to answer my question. I thought there were no answers to this question.

Maria Otonashi, however, answered without hesitation.

"Believe in Oomine's recovery."

I bit my lips.

You make it sound easy!

"What's there to believe in?!" I shouted. "I know how terrible this world is, oh yes I do. How much do you think I have lost already? How the hell am I supposed to believe in a miracle?!"

"I never told you to believe in the world. I know just as well as you do that the world doesn't listen to prayers."

"Look! Then spare me your idle ta—"

"But I do believe in Kazuki."

"What? What are you—"

"I know that Kazuki would never leave me alone, I believe from the bottom of my heart that he will return to my life."

"...W-Why ... how can you be so confident of that...?"

Right. Maria Otonashi was in the same situation as I was. She should have been in just as much despair as I was, but she looked full of hope.

Why? What's the difference between me and her?

"Do you not believe?"

—Aah, our difference is perfectly obvious.

"Do you not believe that Oomine would never leave you like this?"

She has faith in her beloved one.

"I will return to you, Kokone."

Daiya made a promise.

However, I didn't believe in his words one bit. Even worse, I tried to kill myself, whom he treasures more than anything.

Just how badly had I betrayed Daiya?

"I ... I—"

But if I were honest, I couldn't be so optimistic. I didn't believe that his feelings for me alone could bring him back to me.

"...Daiya ... what should I—huh?"

Daiya was crying. He was silently crying.

Just another reflex? I asked myself. ...*No way. That wouldn't occur with such perfect timing.*

"Ah..."

My voice had been reaching him. But he could only look on and blame himself as I became increasingly suicidal. How horrible, how mortifying was *that*?

I hadn't noticed any of this and almost taken what he treasured the most from him, unaware of how cruel I was.

Without me, the thread that was barely connecting him to the world of the living would tear. He would never wake up again.

I finally realized that.

"Daiya needs me."

Just as much as I need him.

"I'm sorry," *for being ignorant of something so simple.* "I'm sorry...!"

I clung to Daiya's body and cried at the top of my lungs.

Maria Otonashi silently waited for me to calm down. She made sure to wind up the music box she had brought to surround me with a gentle tune.

Half a year has passed since then. It's now July.

I heard that Maria Otonashi was elected president of the student council and that she announced her engagement to Kazu-kun.

No one else might realize this, but I can tell that she has to be incredibly strong to not lose faith in Kazu-kun. That said, looking after him every day and not getting the slightest response is bound to be straining and heartbreaking.

So, I find her announcement particularly inspiring.

"Daiya," I say as I stroke his back. There's no answer, of course.

Suicide isn't an option anymore—because I believe in him. There are still days when I lose heart, but that's natural, given that even Maria Otonashi gets worn out.

I wind up the music box she once brought here and let it play.

Lately, I've become the one who seeks comfort in this tune.

"Sigh..." I breathe out.

Even now that Maria Otonashi has helped me see the light, I'm still unable to dismiss my anxiety about fate. I still feel that the world is a harsh place.

However, I'm changing—slowly but surely .

I'm changing by believing in people.

A little more than two years are left until the day of Maria Otonashi's promise.

Before then, I want to become the cheerful girl I once was.

That's my *wish*.

"Your *wish*'s the same, no, Daiya?" I say with a smile that, if I may say so myself, is devoid of any negative emotion.

Suddenly, I notice that Daiya's eyes are tracking my smile. There is an intelligence behind his gaze for the first time in so long.

"Eh...?"

+++ Kazuki Hoshino (19), October 3rd +++

Thoughts resumed. Suddenly. External information not processable until now. Chaos in my head. I was here but consciousness was far away. Tried controlling body, but body did not react. Body operated on its own and was independent of mind.

But now I can control body. But not freely. Like operating a remote control. I also press the wrong buttons from time to time.

Even while in chaos I was able to regain knowledge of language. Because someone talked to me. General knowledge could also be regained. However, my memory is fragmented and does not seem like my own. It's scattered like a jigsaw puzzle, and I can't piece it together. Don't know if I ever can.

I try walking through the house. No one is here. Sister Luu-chan is not here, either. Come to think of it, she is often crying and saying that I am not me. Therefore, I always thought this body had nothing to do with me. I thought I was watching a weird video. That's wrong. I am me. I finally realized that.

I go to the kitchen. I open cupboard and eat bought cookies. I was also able to eat while I was not me. I think my mother always asked me if it tasted good, but didn't know. I only knew that spicy things make me go *ouch*. I hated the rice I got everyday. It was sloppy and didn't have any taste. I only ate sweets. Because "sweet" was the only taste I understood. One day, mother sprinkled "Furikake" seasoning on top of my rice. Suddenly it had taste and I liked my rice. Seasoning is like magic.

As I wait by the entrance, the door opens. The person standing there looks at me with surprise—probably because I hardly ever leave my room—but then she smiles.

It's the woman who lives in the same room as I do. She has a nice smell and I become happy when I see her. "I'm back, Kazuki. I went to see Usui today. You wouldn't believe how muscular he's become!" I don't know what 'Usui' refers to, but I nod a few times. Suddenly, the woman crinkles her eyes. "...I recognize something in your eyes. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I nod again. With a face that has turned all red, the woman calls out to my family. But they aren't here. Should I tell her? I try but I fail because my

thoughts can't be translated into words. I only manage to make meaningless noises.

My head feels jumbled, as if the contents had been thrown into a mixer. Getting everything back into place is very difficult.

But I remember the most important word.

Maria.

That is that woman's name.

My family was happy about the return of my conscious thoughts. Maria was also happy. But I still can't speak yet.

They started to talk to me more. Previously, everyone except for Maria seemed pained when talking to me, but recently they seem a bit happier. I'm also happy.

I spend most of my time staying in the same room. As long as nobody calls out to me, I don't leave my room. Maria lives with me in the same room, but I don't remember when that started. I don't think it's normal for someone that's not part of my family to live with me, but my family doesn't say anything, so I suppose it's okay. But whenever I hear her breathing in the bed above mine, my heart starts pounding and I think that we might not be supposed to sleep in the same room, after all.

Maria and my family are often trying to get me out of the house, especially now that I've regained my ability to think.

But I hate going outside. There is too much light. There are too many colors. Information of all kinds enters my eyes and fills my head. Sooner or later, I get overwhelmed and my head starts to ache. When Maria is forcing me to go outside and I start to wail loudly, she lets me return to my room. But whenever I do that, Maria looks very sad. She shouldn't try to get me to go outside if it makes her sad.

There's one thing Maria says to me everyday.

"I will marry you."

Getting married. I know what those words means. They mean becoming family. People who love each other do that. But I don't get it; if we live together anyway, why get married?

"But I won't force you. We won't get married until you honestly want to."

She says that everyday as well.

"Nor will we get married until you recover your everyday life."

That too. I'm sick of hearing it.

I don't really understand what she's talking about, but it makes me angry. She is ordering me around for no good reason, telling me to do something very difficult.

When I give her the cold shoulder, Maria suddenly looks extremely sad. Sadder than ever before.

The rest of that day my chest hurts for some reason. It hurts so much that I can't sleep and tears pour out of my eyes. Maria notices that I'm crying and climbs down from the top bunk and hugs me. "What's wrong?" I calm down. She's warm. I want to stay like this.

Finally, I notice that I'm so sad because of Maria's extremely sad expression from earlier today. I absolutely don't want to see her like that. When Maria is sad, I am sad as well.

What should I do to keep her from becoming sad?

I should probably listen to everything she tells me. If I listen to her, we will eventually get married as she wishes. If we get married, Maria might always smile at me.

When I imagine that, I suddenly become happy.

In that case, I'm willing to put up with things that hurt a bit.

I started actively going outside. Because Maria wanted me to go outside.

When Maria and I are walking outside together, many of our neighbors will approach us. I think I know them, but I barely remember talking with them. They say they are worried about me and wish me the best, but their words aren't like those of Maria and my family. They're not honest. And they look at me with nasty eyes. I'm sure they would look at me in the same way if I danced naked before them. That always makes me angry, and most of the time when I can't control my anger anymore, Maria looks in my eyes and says, "Let's call it a day, shall we?"

I'm not just afraid of people I know; strangers scare me too. Most of them either ignore us or look away, but some people give us strange looks. It feels very unpleasant whenever that happens. Unlike when Maria and my family look at me, I don't get what they are thinking. They might try to kill me or Maria at any moment. Whenever that thought crosses my mind, I can't move anymore. Maria then gently says, "everything's fine."

People aren't the only obstacles outside. I'm afraid of the large things that are shooting around at incredible speeds because I would definitely die if I got hit by one. It doesn't make sense to me that I'm the only one who seems to care. In fact, my memory tells me that a certain "Mogi-san" got into big trouble when one of them hit her. I also know for a fact that several thousand people die every year because of them. Why does nobody seem to care? Whenever a car or a motorbike passes nearby, I squeeze Maria's hand. She usually squeezes back and smiles at me.

But trains are even scarier than roads. They're giant boxes with lots of people inside. So many that their bodies touch. I'm crushed by an overflow of information. My thoughts can't keep up. I can't think about dozens of people at the same time. *Do I know that person over there and have I forgotten about him? Is that smart phone really so interesting? They must all think various things like I do. They must all have their own lives.* Whenever I start to think like this, my head feels like bursting. "Don't bother yourself with other people," Maria might say, but that's not possible. I don't know how to tell important information apart from superfluous information. I always try to suppress the urge to scream, but I have a limit. Whenever my limit draws near, Maria lets me get off at the next station and rubs my back until I calm down.

Maria always knows what I want even though I can't speak. She's amazing. I'm starting to think that she can read my mind.

Day after day, we practiced going outside. Maria said that it serves as a good stimulus for me. It's true that I've become better at controlling myself. My thoughts have become a bit more organized as well. My memory is also connecting and coming back more frequently.

However, going on regular strolls with me isn't Maria's only goal. She tries to take me somewhere, but we always had to turn back partway because of my limitations.

Finally, one day Maria said:

"We're there!"

It's a hospital. I also regularly go to a hospital, but this one's much bigger than that one. Maria takes out her smart phone and calls someone. After a while, a woman with long hair appears.

"Kazu-kun!" she says while beaming at me.

Apparently, we should know each other ... Hm? I think I know her well. She looks much skinnier than I remember, but her double-edged eyelids make it obvious.

It's Kokone Kirino.

The moment I remember her name, a sharp pain pierces me. I must have done something terrible to her.

"Looks like he recognized you. He seems to be sorry," Maria says.

"Really? I'm surprised that you can tell when his expression has barely changed."

"I can read most of his thoughts," Maria says as she slaps me on the back.

"No need to be scared, Kazuki. You've already seen her at home a few times because she came to visit you. Speaking of which, you haven't come over to our place in a while, have you, Kirino?"

Now that Maria mentions it—a person who looked like Kokone came to visit me when I hadn't regained full consciousness yet. I might have also seen her once or twice after regaining my consciousness. Okay, I see my memory isn't back to normal yet.

Kokone bends her knees a bit and looks up at me.

"Hey there. No need to feel sorry, Kazu-kun. I'm actually grateful to you."

Grateful? Even though I did something horrible?

I'm utterly confused. Kokone grabs me by the wrist and starts to walk. She turns her head toward me a few times, but there's always a bright smile on her face.

"She's delighted that you made it here. She's rooting for you, Kazuki. Besides—" Maria says as she look up at the window of a certain hospital room. "There's someone you can only meet here."

Kokone then says:

"Kazu-kun, go see Daiya!"

I don't know the person who's sitting on the bed, but Kokone introduced him as "Daiya Oomine."

I remember a person by this name who is smart, silver-haired and has piercings. But this person is different. He has black hair and doesn't have any piercings. But the difference is much deeper.

For a moment, I doubted that he was really a "person". I don't know any "persons" who are so silent. But even though he's as quiet as a plant, the raw power to live seems much stronger in him than in anyone else I know. I can't for the life of me remember ever being friends with someone like this.

He slowly moves his head.

" ... "

His voice is so weak that I can't understand anything. I'm still afraid of this stranger. Maria gives me a gentle push on the back and has me put my ear to his mouth.

"...Long time no see, Kazu," he says in an old man's feeble voice.

I feel a slight stirring of emotion, but I still can't match "Daiya Oomine" and this person in my mind.

"I'm sorry, but he doesn't recognize you, Oomine."

"I see. We don't have it easy, Kazu and I, do we? To be honest, I'm quite shocked to see what has become of him, despite your warning. It's as if he's been reborn as a completely different person."

"That comparison is not accurate," Maria counters. "Kazuki will return to normal. He will regain his everyday life."

"I see ... You're right..."

The stranger's expression only changes a little. Maybe he still has a hard time moving his muscles.

"In that case, I'm not gonna lose to him. I'll make sure to walk to the hall on my own two feet for your wedding ceremony."

With these words, he holds out his skinny, shaky, unhealthy-looking hand. I instinctively hold mine out too.

Suddenly, the scar on my right hand catches my attention.

"—Ah."

All of a sudden I find myself overwhelmed by emotion. An image bursts into my head; I see myself looking down upon Daiya, obstinately treading on him to the point where he can't stand up anymore. I don't need to fully remember what happened to know what I did.

—I'm the one who made him this way.

"Ah ... AAAAAAAAAAAH...!" I start wailing loudly. I can't stop myself even if I

know there's no point in doing this. As I keep crying, I fall down on my knees and start rubbing my head against the floor.

"...Otonashi. Does this happen regularly?" he asks as he gazes at me in confusion.

"No ... It's the first time that he's shown this reaction."

I can't be forgiven. I ruined this person's life for my selfish desires. No, not only his life. I sacrificed a whole lot of people. As proof of that, I remember slaughtering countless people. I remember becoming all alone as a consequence.

I did all that just out of desire to be together with the one I love.

Aah ... I'm the worst sinner under the sun.

"It seems like Kazuki's behaving like this because he's blaming himself."

"I see..." the stranger mutters and grabs the handrails of his bed. He grits his teeth as he channels force into his arms. "You had your own unshakable beliefs. Selfish beliefs, no doubt, so I can understand that you would want to blame yourself for adhering to them. But in retrospect, your beliefs benefitted us all. I don't think that's a coincidence. At their core, your beliefs were of a positive nature."

With these words, he stands up. Though very unsteady, he is standing on his own feet.

"D-Daiya ... has stood up...?" Kokone remarks as she gets teary-eyed.

Daiya gives her a brief smile and then lays his hand on my head.

"As you see, I can stand up. I will stand up again and again. That's all thanks to you, Kazu. I already forgave you a long time ago."

"Same here," Kokone adds while wiping away her tears.

Forgiven?

They have forgiven me?

Am I really allowed to just believe that? Is it really OK to spoil me like this?

When I raise my head, he holds out his hand again.

His hand is just as skinny as before and still shaky, but I can clearly see the strength of his will glinting in his eyes.

I hesitantly shake his hand with mine. It's the hand of the Daiya Oomine I know.

At last, I was able to connect this person and Daiya Oomine.

Aah—

He's Daiya.

Daiya has forgiven me.

After that day, my thoughts have become much more organized—most of the fog that had muddled my mind has been lifted. I'm also starting to learn how to filter external information and I have grown accustomed to the overwhelmingly wide range of colors in the world. I can even leave the house alone if I pluck up some courage.

I also met a lot of other people. For instance, I visited Kasumi Mogi at a large facility, called a rehabilitation center, where there were lots of people in wheelchairs. She was happy to tell me everything about her current life, although the only thing I remembered about her was that she had been one of my classmates. However, when I got a bit flustered because of her cute smile, Maria smacked me on the head even though she's usually so gentle with me. We also went to a renowned university to see Haruaki Usui. He seemed much more determined than I remembered, which confused me a little. He was excited about his upcoming first official baseball match. I met Yuuri Yanagi in a café near the University of Tokyo. She was emitting more pheromones than ever before and had a few unfamiliar men in tow. Much to Maria's chagrin, Yuuri-san insisted on taking all kinds of photos of Maria, saying that she was a great subject for photos. At a park near my home, I met Nana Yanagi and Touji Kijima, whom I had known since middle school. Yanagi-san was happy about my progress and gave me a kiss on the cheek. Maria smacked me on the head again even though I hadn't done anything bad.

I was warmly accepted by all of them. Why? Didn't I do horrible things to them? How can they be so kind to me? To someone who can't even speak?

But there's something I realized from meeting them: they're essential if I'm to return to normal. They are the keys to the fragments of my shuffled memory. By talking with them, I can slowly but surely piece those fragments together and remember the kind of everyday life I used to live.

Whenever my memory gets reinforced, I regain a part of my former self.

However, even though I'm far less confused now, I still haven't regained the ability to speak. There must be something else that keeps me from talking.

I'm probably just afraid. I'm afraid of actively taking part in communicating with others. I once secluded myself from everyone because I thought that

that was the only thing I could do. I still can't shake off the notion that I deserve solitude.

Daiya may have forgiven me, but my sins are grave. I can't help but think that I should lock myself into my own little cage.

Ah, but the only thing that I can't seem to endure is being separated from Maria. I'm sure she feels the same way about me.

Maria's graduation ceremony is happening today

I'm preparing a meal for her. I've settled on some fried chicken, which is one of her favorites, and an avocado salad. Of course, I also made sure to buy a strawberry tart because she can't get enough of them. When I initially regained my consciousness, I was extremely afraid of knives and fire, but those fears have faded. My sense of taste still favors sweet things, but because the other members of my family don't seem to like it when everything is sweet, I've started to properly season my dishes. I've been getting good responses lately.

Maria originally planned to get a job after graduating from high school, but my parents strongly encouraged her to go to college, so she changed her mind. Maria did not usually modify her decisions once she made up her mind, so she must have either had doubts about her original decision anyway, or simply didn't want to disregard the opinion of the people who were providing for her. Or maybe it was both factors? In the end, she passed the entrance exam and will join Iroha-san's faculty starting this spring.

I've settled down quite a bit. Perhaps, my life will go on just like this.

However—

It happened while I was dipping the chicken thighs into the oil.

"—Ah."

All of a sudden, the world gets veiled by fog.

I abruptly lose my connection to the rest of the world and find myself in complete seclusion. Everything becomes irrelevant. Nothing has meaning anymore. Nothing is of import. My memory disperses in all directions and my thoughts lose focus. I'm disappearing, disappearing disappearing disappearing——

(Ah, I've returned to my consciousnessless state.)

There are no colors, no words, no background. It's a world more vague than a dream. I feel like I'm shackled and sinking into a bottomless swamp. I can't breathe. Aah ... I was never supposed to escape from this swamp; I was supposed to drown here. I struggle to return to the surface, but my body won't move. I don't even know where up and down are. I just keep sinking deeper into nothingness where even the word "despair" doesn't exist.

But back then, *she* would never give up and kept talking to me. She would keep calling my name. "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", with all kinds of expressions on her face. "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", in all kinds of voices. "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", "Kazuki", but always with love and hope.

That's why I'm able to return.

"Kazuki!"

Suddenly, the fog is dispelled and I instantly return to the kitchen. Maria's worried face is right beside me. She has tossed her pink flower bouquet on the table and is still holding the tube containing her diploma.

As I regain my consciousness, I swiftly switch off the burner where I've placed the frying pan.

"A-Are you okay, Kazuki?"

I look into her eyes and say with a nod, "I'm okay."

It seems like there's still "emptiness" deeply nested within me. I might be assaulted at any time when the nearly endless time materializes and tries to crush me under its weight—a weight that I can't possibly resist. The madness called "emptiness" is always lying in ambush to take me back into the void.

But I'm not afraid.

I know that whenever that happens, Maria will call me back.

Maria, my only desire is to be with you for all eternity.

What can I do to achieve this? How can I communicate my boundless feelings to you?

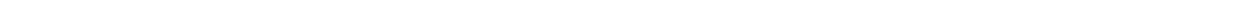
Ah, but I think I know how to convey them using a single word; I just have to do the same thing you did to call me back.

I open my mouth to say the word I hold dearest.

"Maria"

It's been so long that I can't tell if I pronounced it correctly, but I know that she understood.

After all, Maria is crying ever so happily.



+++ Maria Hoshino (18), September 8th +++

I've grown my hair back to its former length for this day. It's tied up and hidden beneath my veil.

I used to slightly resemble *her* when I had long hair, but now that I'm 18, that's no longer the case. The resemblance has disappeared entirely.

If I'm honest, that's a bit unsettling. But whenever I feel anxious, he says the word that makes me take heart.

"Let's go, Maria."

The doors to the rooftop chapel open to the smiles of our dear friends amidst dazzling lights against a blue background.

As I stand beside him in my pure white dress, he takes my hand and looks straight ahead.

We *wish* for no less than eternity, but this holy vow is just another step into our future.

THE END

Author's Notes

Hello and long time no see to everyone who has been following "Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria." This is Eiji Mikage.

I just noticed that the previous volume was released in January, 2013. In other words, it took two years and five months for the final volume to be released. And if that weren't enough, there was already a two year gap between the fourth and fifth volumes, so I'm really sorry to the fans whom I've kept waiting. No, really ... in fact, you don't normally get to release a continuation after putting it off for so long ... twice. It's all thanks to my fans that I was able to release the final volume.

But I'm a bit unsure if anyone will even notice this release, given the long delay. Tell all your friends! I don't care if you lend this book to them!

Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria has turned into a work that has supported me as a writer. That being said, I've written everything I wanted to write, so I don't feel like dragging the story on any longer. I think I did everything within my power. Goodbye Kazuki and Maria!

Furthermore, I'd like to distance myself from the light novel scene for a while, now that I've finished this series. (Sorry, fans of my other series.)

This is not because I've grown tired of light novels, but because I think it's a necessary decision for my future life as a writer. While I would love to return to Dengeki Bunko with an increased level of skill, I don't know when—if at all—that will be. I'll just say that I will continue to work for Kadokawa and ASCII Media Works.

While I'll be writing elsewhere, my writing style won't be much influenced by that fact. I may abide by the rules of the format, but I'll continue to write what I want to write or what I believe is right. I have no plans to write anything I can't approve of. If you think my style has changed, that's not because of the format, but because I want to take the story somewhere different from my previous works. I want to keep writing not only to make a living, but also to express my thoughts and beliefs.

If you spot a book by "Eiji Mikage" in the near future, it would be great if you could give it a try. I'll make sure to announce my stuff on my Twitter account, so look it up if you like.

On to the thank-you note.

I'd like to thank my current editor in charge, Miki-san. It must have been hard to take over the series in the middle, but despite that, you made sure I had a stress-free environment in which to write. You're one skilled editor.

I'll also send my thanks to Kawamoto-san, my former editor in charge. Without you, this book would never have come into existence. Your rigorous guidance ultimately helped me develop the self-confidence that still serves me today. My continued activities as a writer can be attributed to you.

Thanks to my illustrator, Tetsuo-san. I can't thank you enough for sticking with me despite the frequent and long gaps. I think you had every right to quit because it was unclear when the next volume would come out. I'm really happy about getting to know you. My happiness upon seeing Maria for the first time is an irreplaceable memory of mine.

This story is built on the support of even more people. It's all thanks to the readers that this story could be concluded—this is in no way an exaggeration. To be honest, I would have abandoned the series after the fourth volume if not for the support of my readers. Thank you so much for holding me back and making me sit before my keyboard.

Incidentally, I would also like to mention that I'm creating music as part of a group called "Replica Letter." By the time this volume is released, I will have uploaded the opening theme of Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria to Nico Nico Douga and YouTube. Try searching for it if you like!

Well then, I will keep writing novels, but for now I'd like to say goodbye. Thank you for seeing this story through to the finish.

- Eiji Mikage

Translator's Notes

Hello everyone, this is EusthEnoptEron, the translator of Hakomari. Since this is the final volume of the series, I would like to imitate the author and say a few concluding words.

So I dug out this relatively obscure series in November 2009 (that's before the third volume came out!) and it has been one of my all-time favorites ever since. Old-established readers will notice that this is just two months before I picked the series up for my main project on Baka-Tsuki, where it's been sitting for a long time now. Quite a lot has happened since then—editors came and went, the project was almost abandoned because of a lack of interest, new side-projects were added to my portfolio, punctuation rules changed (with every release of a new volume!), and I graduated university. As such, I'm quite proud to finally be able to finish this 5-year-long commitment of mine. Well, to be exact, the earlier volumes are still in dire need of proper editing. It's a wiki, so if you're reasonably eloquent and a good person, consider contributing!

On that note, I'd like to express my utmost gratitude to GrrArr, my hardworking editor who always descended from the heavens when I needed him (i.e. whenever a new volume was released) and was brave enough to make vast changes to my oftentimes incomprehensible word constructions. I'd also like to thank Kadi for being the first person who dared to join me and this project (around the time I started with the third volume). My gratitude also goes to the Spanish Hakomari translation team who have provided us with cleaned versions of the illustrations and located quite a few errors of various severities. Last but not least, thanks to the other volunteers who have helped improving Hakomari, especially the last volume.

Enough of the ramblings, though. I really hope you enjoyed Hakomari as much as I did. It may have taken a turn for the corny romantic in the end, but I think that's quite fitting to conclude this series in a satisfying manner (and I love romantic stuff, as you can see from my other projects). Nothing worse than inconclusive open ends!

I encourage all readers to give the OP and ED themes Mikage mentioned a listen. They are linked on the project page and surprisingly good. If you enjoyed the series, also consider supporting Mikage by buying the original (Japanese) books—the project page contains links to both physical and

digital copies. If you're in the mood for some more Mikageness, check out the Kamisu Reina series. I'll be working to finish that one in the near future.

Finally, if there's anything missing, then it's a picture of the wedding ceremony. Artists out there! Grab your pens and Wacoms! I'm sure I'm not the only one who'd love to see one.

So long,

-EEE

Footnotes

1. Jump up↑ The Oklahoma Mixer or "Turkey in the Straw" is a well-known American folk song from the early 19th century. A dance set to Turkey in the Straw is commonly taught in Japanese schools.
2. Jump up↑ Mayim Mayim (Hebrew: "water, water") is a popular Israeli folk dance. It's accompanied by a song of the same name.
3. Jump up↑ Koshien Stadium is a baseball park located near Kobe in Nishinomiya, Hyōgo Prefecture, Japan. The stadium was built to host Japan's national high school baseball tournaments and can be considered the mecca of Japanese baseball players.

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain. Baka-Tsuki does not and will not condone any activities of such, including but not limited to rent, sell, print, auction.

Credits

Author: Eiji Mikage

Illustrator: Tetsuo (formerly known as 415)

Translators: EusthEnoptEron

Editors: Kadi, Grrarr, Quintasan

PDF compiled by: Kiri
